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Grebanier, Bernard D N

1903-

The heart of Hamlet; the
play Shakespeare wrote. N.Y.,

Crowell [1960]

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THE HEART OF HAMLET

The Play Shakespeare Wrote

BERNARD GREBANIER

Thomas Y. Crowell Company

NEW YORK · ESTABLISHED 1834

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Designed by Laurel Wagner

*Manufactured in the United States of America
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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 60-8252

For

CONSUELO URISARRI FORD

*He that hath wings, let him soar;
Mine is the heart at your feet
Here, that must love you to live.*

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UNLESS EXPERIENCE BE A JEWEL, THAT I HAVE PURCHASED
AT AN INFINITE RATE.

The Merry Wives of Windsor, II, ii

I *The Jewel of Experience: in Explanation*

HAD I HAD the foreknowledge to seize the occasion, I might have spared myself years of confusion. But how, at seventeen, was I to imagine that *Hamlet* would thereafter be in any way important to me?

The experience was one to prove Wilde to have been talking merely common sense when he insisted that life imitates art. Mr. Rocco, my barber, in his simplicity had never heard of *Tom Jones*, and I in my seventeen-year-old complexity had heard of it but had not yet read it. Nevertheless, as he sat by my side one night at the theater, Mr. Rocco unconsciously aped one of the most hilarious passages in Fielding's novel.

I had saved up enough money to take my girl to a performance of *Hamlet*. At the last minute she had decided to quarrel with me, and refused to go. That night in the barber's chair I bitterly commented on the instability of women; to my surprise, Mr. Rocco, scissors poised in air, offered to accompany me instead so that the ticket might be used. In a way I can no longer recapture, this seemed to my adolescent mind like exquisite revenge, and I agreed.

My companion amply made up for the mediocrity of the performance. He had never heard of the play, he could have under-

stood little of its language, but I doubt if anyone ever enjoyed a performance of *Hamlet* more. Throughout the evening he sat on the edge of his seat, now and again throwing me a look of anguished apprehension. Beads of perspiration decked his troubled brow—and these were by no means due entirely to the heated atmosphere of the gallery or the season. And then—this, lovers of Fielding, I swear is truth!—when the Ghost appeared in the Queen's chamber, Mr. Rocco cried out, "Look out!" After the final curtain, exhausted and exalted, he exclaimed, "Wasa damn good! *Molto simpatico e naturale*. Geesa, I wasa scare!"

Had I only known that night that I was not to become, after all, a great pianist! Had I only guessed that talking and thinking about *Hamlet* were to be daily occupations for most of the rest of my life! What an opportunity I let slip when I failed to ask Mr. Rocco what the play meant to him, what precisely had evoked his pity and fear! I might then and there have started re-discovering Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. That it meant something very exciting and very clear to Mr. Rocco his actions eloquently testified. He found it, moreover, *simpatico* and *naturale*.

But everyone knows that *Hamlet* is a good play—everyone, apparently, but Mr. T. S. Eliot. If it were not a good play, actors would not forever be reviving it, and audiences would not be crowding theaters to see it even when Mr. Evans or Mr. Olivier assumes the title role. Unhappily, only the professional scholars have told us what the play is supposed to mean, and what they have told us makes confusion worse confounded.

I managed to pass safely into my early twenties without becoming a victim of that confusion, for *Hamlet*, during that interim, was the last thing I was thinking about. My thoughts, such as they were, were indeed far removed from all matters academic or anything associated with Shakespeare on a certain fateful afternoon in 1926 when Professor Lewis Freeman Mott, chairman of the English department of the college which was to graduate me in a few weeks, stopped me in a corridor to ask me an amazing question. Would I be interested in conducting a course in Shakespeare?

This esteemed scholar could have had no idea how astounding his offer was. At the moment he made it I had not the slightest intention of becoming a teacher of Shakespeare or of anything else.

My only purposes connected with college were to be done with institutions of learning forever. Indeed, a few days earlier, the final speech required of me in Public Speaking had been devoted to a scorching attack on the teaching profession, during which I did not omit quoting Shaw's truism on those who teach. Nor had I any idea of how I could have earned the good opinion of a man so universally held in awe as Professor Mott, for in his classes I had had little to say—unless I could say it in writing.

It may be for the reason that to a boy the incense of flattery is of all fragrances the most enchanting that I managed to answer him, on my way through the flooring, in the affirmative. But there were other incitements, too, to my seizing the opportunity of immediate employment—some practical, the chief one eminently romantic. On the promise of this position I was married in a few days. And so my education began that week.

My next obligation, plainly, was to transform myself into a scholar. Paderewski's laurels, which up to the time of that fatal interview I had intended snatching, could rest on his snowy head: he was safe from me now. I had more pressing problems to face. Up to this point I had taken my college studies quite insouciantly. I had been merely an omnivorous reader of literature, an enthusiast for great books with an unconquerable distaste for homework. Registered in a course on the Age of Pope, I would be too deep in Dostoevski to have time for Addison; another semester, Addison would prove irresistibly fascinating when I was supposed to be reading Tennyson. My reading had been exclusively for pleasure—a habit which to date I have rarely been able to correct. I had read a great deal, in several literatures, but I had read very few of the books about books—of the kind I have since written myself.

Developing more scholarly methods in my literary pursuits thus became quite suddenly a matter of self-preservation. For not many college teachers have entered upon their careers with the disadvantages I encountered on my first day of teaching.

My Shakespeare class was composed entirely of young men who had been my fellow students only three months before. Some of them were annoyed, some were indignant, at having to sit under me; others considered the situation a huge joke. All of them were determined to make things as difficult as possible. It was obvious that I

could expect a steady barrage of questions all semester. Since that first class no other has been hard to teach.

I felt myself challenged. With the foolhardiness of youth I began the course with the most challenging of all the plays. I had been working at *Hamlet* for an entire summer in anticipation, and was impatient to begin the contest. While resolved to be brave, I nevertheless did not forget that part of valor which is discretion. One thing I had learned from going to college: it is possible for a teacher to go through a course without once expressing a conviction of his own; such a lecturer was even held by the students he bored to be very scholarly—scholarly, in fact, in proportion to his ability to bore. Scholarship, it seemed, was a matter of culling bushels of quotations from the critics to fling at one's students. I therefore was prepared, after a summer's intense note-taking, to engulf the opposition: I had copybooks filled with theories on *Hamlet* by Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge, Ulrici, Werder, Klein, Bradley, Stoll, Eliot, and Freud. I atoned for not having any theories of my own by presenting a profusion of the theories of others; for a brief hour I basked in a light of awe because of my references to Freud and Eliot, the two newest gods on the horizon. But I did not enjoy that respect for long.

A sorry state of affairs soon developed. As I proceeded to read the text of *Hamlet* with my students, the theories which I had faithfully collected and whose number I was still busy augmenting had the lamentable tendency of canceling one another out. It was, of course, very easy and even exciting to use one theory, as we advanced line-by-line through the play, as a cudgel with which to belabor another theory. But by the time we had finished the fifth act, neither I nor my students had the faintest idea of what the play was about. Many of the theories were attractive and had an apparent validity; all, taken together, proved that not one was acceptable. I had been far too thorough, as my sometime fellow students did not omit pointing out.

Before it fell to my lot to teach *Hamlet* again I had the intervening nine months to add to my knowledge of scholarship on the play. The prodigy I then delivered to my classes died the same death. I tried the same procedure, except that I quoted more critics. At the final curtain I knew less about *Hamlet* than ever.

When at the end of my third year's teaching I had followed the identical approach with equal futility, it seemed time to be a little wise. There was no denying any longer the fact that the more I knew of other men's *Hamlet* the less I knew about Shakespeare's. Further scholarly opinion could be of no help. If, to end the dilemma, I decided to adopt one theory out of hand and let the matter rest, which should I choose? How could one decide among the claims for respect of such men as Samuel Johnson, Goethe, Coleridge, Werder, or Bradley? And what of all that enlightened medical opinion, when the doctors looked at literature? Dared one be so unmodern as to turn one's back on the subtler, more titillating interpretations of Freud and his school—beckoning behind half-opened doors from dim chambers peopled by the psychopathic? And what was to be answered to the doggedly unromantic scholarship beginning to emerge out of the level topography of the American Middle West, from men who calmly averred that the reason Hamlet fails to kill the King any earlier is that such an act would have ended the play before the last act? Or—most dreadful of all possibilities—could the untamable T. S. Eliot be right (in those days who could have guessed he would become an Old Master?) when he hinted that *Hamlet* is a bad play after all? "We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him," Mr. Eliot had not long before declared.¹

It was at this point that my memory of Mr. Rocco came to the rescue. I must now try to be simple and sincerely interested in the play itself, like my old barber, and let the work speak to me without anyone else's help. If an illiterate barber could understand the play, why should I permit scholarship to befuddle me?

I decided therefore upon an experiment. The fourth year I explained to my classes my current dilemma and confessed frankly that I had no idea what the play actually said. I told my students that if we cooperated I thought we might discover what Shakespeare intended us to understand, provided we read *Hamlet* with no preconceptions. George Bernard Shaw says that one of the troubles with mankind is that we are forever distressed to find that our pail contains dirty water, but that we never throw out the dirty water before dipping into the clear well. "We persist," he says, "in pouring the clear water into the dirty; and our minds are always muddled in

consequence." Well, I was resolved to throw out all the dirty water I had scooped up, before dipping into the clear water of Shakespeare himself.

This time my class read *Hamlet* as though we were all an audience at the first day's performance in Elizabethan London. We tried to have no ideas about what the play would unfold, and took up each scene in order, speculating only on what we had already read, and charting carefully what we had thus far discovered, scene by scene. Very early the work began to take shape, and to my stupefaction the story became entirely clear, the characters began to breathe, all the incidents fell into place, and at the conclusion I felt I knew exactly what Shakespeare had meant to convey. As I took stock of what I now comprehended, I recognized that it was in agreement at various points with the strictures of this or that commentator. But to my horror I also realized that the meaning the play now had amounted in its totality to a new theory! The hero himself was a completely different kind of man from any he had been described as being—a man at last quite intelligible and in no way strange,*

* For having come to the conclusion that Hamlet is quite intelligible, Sarah Bernhardt was sneeringly dismissed when she enacted the role. "In her defense of her reading of the part, she said she thought Hamlet a simple character, and one critic remarked, 'Need we say more than that?' Meaning to say, the remark put her out of court."² I was born too late for the privilege of seeing her performance. There is, of course, nothing very inviting in the prospect of seeing any woman masquerading as Hamlet—least of all when she is "dressed and got up like the pictures of young Raphael."³ And while I strongly feel that during a Shakespearean performance in any other language

My native English now I must forgo,
And now my tongue's use is to me no more
Than an unstrung viol or a harp,
Or like a cunning instrument cased up,
Or, being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony;

Richard II, I, iii, 160 seq.

nevertheless to have missed the Bernhardt Hamlet is probably to have been robbed of an important experience. Her intelligent defense as well as several other details of her performance imply a comprehension in many respects far in advance of most commentators.

however brilliant. I was appalled to find that I had stumbled upon a new theory when my only desire had been to understand Shakespeare. Stout Cortez—or even Balboa—silent upon a peak in Darien, could not have been more stunned.

Now the question which I had sought to answer, “What was the author saying when he wrote the work?” is a question which rarely agitates directors in our theater. On that subject Mr. Eric Bentley, who for freshness of vision has few peers among scholars of modern drama, in a stimulating chapter on “Doing Shakespeare Wrong” has cogent things to say. He does not forget the contributions of the last few decades in abolishing the ponderousness of earlier twentieth-century productions. That called for abolishing. The Shakespeare one saw on the boards in my youth was more oppressive than impressive—an endless march of ever-changing painted sets, pompous oratory, and elaborate costumes. The reaction against this heavy style, however, as Mr. Bentley accurately perceives, has been to have “no style at all.” The moderns tend to say, “Let Shakespeare speak for himself,” and profess to have no theories about producing him. Their basic assumption, observes Mr. Bentley shrewdly, is fallacious, for they pretend “that an entirely negative performance *could* be given.” The modern director often feels he is doing enough for the play if he maintains an uninterrupted pace, and is sure the actors “are seen and heard” and do “not bump into each other.” Many performances are content to be “merely decorative.” No one seems interested in achieving clarity of meaning. Of Miss Webster, who has often directed Shakespeare, Mr. Bentley says, “A fog surrounds her Shakespeare”; and he notes that in the Olivier film of *Hamlet* “the story was not told (they thought that we knew it or that it doesn’t matter).” *

Mr. Bentley is, of course, entirely right. How can Shakespeare be “allowed to speak for himself” if the directors and the actors do not know what he is saying? Whatever they deliver—be it sense, nonsense, or chaos—they inevitably become during the performance the only means by which the author can address us. Obviously, the first step in directing even a merely adequate performance of a play must be the seeking of some knowledge of the play’s meaning.

But there are directors and actors who are in a worse position than those “moderns” of whom Mr. Bentley justly complains—if a

worse position be possible. And they are those worthies who are, these days, chiefly occupied in racking their ingenuities to give a new twist to a Shakespearean play. The one factor they deem totally irrelevant to their conceptions is what Shakespeare might have meant. With them novelty alone is the criterion of merit. The more far-fetched the invention, the more credit they think they earn. Yet it is a truth as old as Longinus that "ugly and parasitical growths arise in literature from a single cause, that pursuit of novelty," which even in his time was "the fashionable craze of the day."

During the Winter of 1949, for example, New York saw a brilliant piece of acting on the part of the Malvolio in an otherwise indifferent *Twelfth Night*. But however clever as an exhibition of the art of acting, it was not the Malvolio Shakespeare had created. After complimenting the actor sincerely on his skill in projecting *an* interpretation of the role, I mildly protested that in making Malvolio far too sympathetic he had created a character both at variance with the text and quite destructive of the comic effect of the Malvolio story; he exclaimed, "I'm delighted to hear you say that! I deliberately altered Malvolio to a well-meaning, kindly, if too fussy old dear. As the snob Shakespeare painted him, I found him unbearable."

Recently another well-known actor was telling me of his experiences on the road with *The Merchant of Venice*. Orthodox Jews, he informed me, conduct a service for the dead when one of their children marries out of his faith. Bent on innovation, my actor-friend introduced a scene of that kind to fill out the story of Jessica's elopement and "emphasize Shylock's piety"! He went further: acting Shylock himself, he thought up a wonderful new effect. When Shylock, crushed by the reversal of fortune, was about to make his final exit, the actor paused in the doorway and held out his arms to suggest crucifixion! I asked how successful the new ideas had proved. He answered without a glint of humor, "You know—I just couldn't put it across. Shakespeare stacked the cards too much against Shylock!"

In the 1957 season a prominent director had a new brainstorm. We were convinced that *Measure for Measure* was laid in Venice instead of in Vienna—after all, both cities begin with a V! Since the play is listed among the comedies, everyone was desperately funny. The audience dutifully laughed at Isabella, Angelo, and the Duke—

though, to be fair, only half-heartedly—although an unfunnier work than this acidulous play, which runs over with sublime and somber poetry, has never been written. Best of all, the sets (as they could never have been in Vienna or London) were made up of long strips of Venetian blinds, and the stage crew had the merriest time of anyone, effecting a change of scene by opening and shutting them with a fine snap. It was more like a carnival, of course, than the performance of a masterwork of dramatic satire. But few minded that: the production was “so original.”

When it comes to presenting *Hamlet* it is possible that most actors and directors even feel obliged to introduce some novelties to justify the production. Take the case of Mr. Olivier’s cinema version, where any number of innovations were introduced. I mention only one striking instance. In the last scene the Queen was made to seize the poisoned chalice with the deliberate purpose of committing suicide. The actress very well conveyed the idea that she knew the drink would prove fatal; she was warning her son by this act of self-sacrifice not to partake of the cup himself. In the play Shakespeare wrote (Mr. Olivier omitted much of it), the Queen is an unknowing victim when she drinks; moreover, such an act of sacrifice would have been impossible to Shakespeare’s shallow Gertrude. The film’s director, of course, might consider that objection quite beside the point. Certainly no critic saw fit to make the objection.

Apparently nothing is now of less moment than the author’s conscious intentions. (In some quarters it is only the author’s *unconscious* intentions that are respected. Naturally only the author is disqualified to have an opinion about *them*.) If innovation is to be the criterion of excellence, why need so able a man as Mr. Olivier have refrained from ingenuity? By this date, however, the most daring of all innovations would be to present *Hamlet* from the dramatist’s point of view.

At the very outset of this study, then, we are confronted with a basic issue: what is the function of the interpreter? Self-expression has been exalted in our century, with the help of progressive education, to the degree that the vaporizing of an idiot is held (democratically) to merit as much attention as the sober reflections of an Aristotle. “Because,” we are reminded, “everyone is entitled to his”

—one should say “their”—“opinion.” The average reader would much rather tell you his reactions to *Hamlet* than study the play for what Shakespeare meant. The college student of our time apparently can hardly wait to finish the first chapter of a novel before flinging the book aside to “discuss” it with his friends. One pictures the lad in a dither as he turns to the first page, asking himself, “I wonder what I’m going to think about this!” He never will ask, “What is Flaubert trying to say to me?” but only, “What am I going to be saying about Flaubert?”

It is not out of keeping with the times, therefore, that public interpreters should rarely penetrate beyond their own feelings when they take upon themselves the performance of a masterpiece. It is a forgotten concept that an actor or a musician ought to be the humble servant of the creator’s purposes. (Certain of the New Critics go so far as to maintain that the creator’s purposes are irrelevant.) Since audiences will flock to see a popular star (these days, preferably a popular cinema star) in no matter how deplorable a play, or to hear a virtuoso in no matter how trivial a program, writers and composers tend to degenerate into mere handmaidens to the performer’s personality. In recent years, when leading actors have murdered some of Shakespeare’s best plays, it has been the pastime of dramatic critics to hold Shakespeare responsible for production failures. *Macbeth*, they have told us, is after all only a cheap melodrama—overlaid, it is true, with some good poetry; *Twelfth Night* is a hodgepodge of improbabilities wholly impossible to manage (*Death of a Salesman*, of course, is not!); *As You Like It*, a favorite butt, is unactable rot. How sad that the gifted Miss H., the talented Mr. E., the inspiring Miss C. should waste their incomparable abilities on dated rubbish! *

* Even so sensitive a critic as Mr. John Mason Brown could say of *Twelfth Night* that, although “thousands, fortunately, still delight in seeing the comedy,” he himself “would feel more relief than grief” at the prospect of never seeing it again. Mr. Wolcott Gibbs behaved on the same occasion with elaborate condescension toward the play, and pretended to find *Twelfth Night* indistinguishable in plot and dramatic personae from *As You Like It*. Mr. Gibbs, one of the most brilliant and astute of critics when the subject was contemporary drama, was almost insufferable in parading his boredom with Shakespeare; he almost never

For any individual, on stage or in the audience, to exalt his own reactions above the creator's intentions is a strange kind of conceit. Surely Mr. Toscanini held his unrivaled place among conductors in our century because it was Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner he gave us—never Toscanini. It was clearly his ambition always to approximate the performance for which the composer himself would have wished. Mr. Stokowski in his day has drawn more thrilling sounds from the strings than Mr. Toscanini cared to evoke, and has been more exciting at certain moments of a composition. But the moment passed, and a self-respecting music lover could only be ashamed for having been gullible enough to be pleased even momentarily with such sensationalism, once he recovered his sense of proportion. An interpreter like Stokowski gives us himself rather than the composer. The actor, scholar, or critic surely owes it in all humility to Shakespeare to be the dramatist's Toscanini, not his Stokowski.

But where are the Toscaninis among Shakespearean directors and actors? Mr. Olivier proved himself one of the very greatest interpreters of our age with his magnificent impersonation of Oedipus years ago, and almost equalled that feat anew with his cinema version of *Henry V*. For these two performances alone he is entitled to profound respect and thanks. Alas! his effeminate Dane is far from

failed to commiserate with the actors who were trapped by the dullness of a Shakespearean vehicle. Sometimes the critics are downright offensive. When Mr. Robeson gave his handsome-looking and entirely meaningless performance of Othello, one rapturous reviewer praised him for rescuing the work from musty obscurity; "What was *Othello*," he cried, "before Robeson played it?" In truth that season it became impossible to utter a syllable on Miss Webster's production because everyone's social conscience seemed involved; not to have adored Mr. Robeson's Othello was tantamount to being enrolled in the Ku Klux Klan. Not being a snob, one would have been willing, though we were at war, to have had a German or a Japanese take the role if he made some attempt to be the Othello Shakespeare created. If Mr. Robeson had any idea at all of what he was doing, he seemed to think he was playing Uncle Tom. As for Shakespearean criticism in the metropolitan papers and monthlies, a study of it should prove rewarding to anyone nurturing both a love of Shakespeare and a bilious temper.

Shakespeare's Hamlet, and sadly distorts the plot of the play itself. Mr. Gielgud as director and actor gave us a work of perfection in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; in the movie of *Julius Caesar* his brilliant Cassius lifted the film out of ineptitude; in a minor role in the movie of *Richard III* his great acting made Mr. Olivier's appear merely extraordinarily clever: in 1959 his ebullient Benedick was Shakespeare's scintillating hero himself. Earlier he demonstrated himself to be a performer of the truest genius when he gave *Hamlet*; rarely has there been a display of such virtuosity on the stage. But his Hamlet was not admirable as an interpretation of *Shakespeare's* hero. In every scene Mr. Gielgud was thrilling; but there was no architecture to the play as he gave it. He would have been hard put to it to describe what manner of man his Hamlet was when all the hero's conduct was taken into account. Mr. Gielgud, in short, was Shakespeare's Stokowski, not his Toscanini.*

In this matter of indifference to the creator's purposes, the theatrical designers are as great sinners as the actors. A celebrated designer dismissed objections to his gloomy sets for Macbeth's castle as irrelevant. Shakespeare makes it quite clear that the castle is pleasant and inviting. Granting that the sets were impressive in themselves and might have served superbly for *Dracula*, I objected that they belied the dramatist's express descriptions. The artist, however, affirmed his right to ignore the playwright's demands and follow his own imagination. It did not concern him that it must be highly ludicrous to hear Duncan exclaim:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses

as the King looks up to an edifice so terrifying that anyone normally constituted would have chanced the dangers of a savage forest rather

* Nevertheless, Miss Margaret Webster, Mr. Robeson's director, can say: "There is not one 'right' Hamlet with all the others wrong!"⁵ She insists that Shakespeare would never have pinned his actors down to any given interpretation; to stipulate one, she says, would be asking not for acting but for "a system of mathematics." These fashionable (if odd, for a director) opinions are expressed in a volume entitled *Shakespeare Without Tears!*

than spend a night in so murderous-looking a dungeon. Was not the effect Shakespeare planned far subtler than obvious Gothic horror? Later Mr. Orson Welles presented Macbeth's dwelling as a subterranean cave, chill and damp from the constant trickling of water down the overhanging rocks! But the bearskins and Valkyrie helmets of the cast must have been sufficient protection against influenza!

Already, because of the popularity and frequent revivals of Mr. Olivier's movie, every semester I find myself having to disabuse my students, who are uniformly convinced that Gertrude's drinking of the potion in the last scene is suicidal in intent. Who can calculate the wrong ideas which irresponsible direction and acting instill in the public concerning these plays? Among the cardinal matters in *Hamlet* to be understood correctly, there is one concerning which I for years cherished the wrong conviction. A remarkably exciting performance of Gertrude, witnessed in my student days, was responsible for completely detouring me from the true path of the tragedy's plot. The actress had powerfully conveyed the notion that the Queen had been a partner in the murder of her first husband; her guilty looks lingered so many years in my memory that they long delayed my understanding that Gertrude is completely unaware that Hamlet's father met his death through murder. When I came to know the actress personally years later and jestingly spoke of her error, she said (with the tongue of actors!), "My dear, I hadn't the slightest idea of *what* I was trying to project. I make it a rule to look as though I *did* understand what I am doing. Actually, my chief worry was that, although I was *years* younger than the woman playing Ophelia, they had insisted on a make-up for me that added decades to my appearance!"

In our times there has been a more disturbing tendency to introduce into the plays overtones, not only un-Shakespearean, but thoroughly nasty as well. During the "Get thee to a nunnery" speeches in his uncut *Hamlet*, Mr. Evans encircled Ophelia in a passionate embrace while he hoarsely whispered the lines between kisses on her neck—thus suggesting elements of pathology overlooked even by the doctors. In a movie presenting a sequence from the last scene of *Othello*, Mr. Ronald Colman, enacting the Moor, was seen kissing Desdemona most tenderly and with much passion

while he choked the life out of her. Just what violence these highly original ideas work upon Shakespeare's tragic conceptions, no one seems to have questioned. Is a tradition in the process of being originated to transform Shakespeare's tragic figures into the likenesses of inmates escaped from a psychopathic ward?

The Freudians, of course, have been busy with Shakespeare.* We need not now deal with their observations on *Hamlet*. But it may here be remarked that ever since Freud discovered an Oedipus complex in the Prince, the scene in Gertrude's chamber has been presented in a fashion to make one squirm. To this revolting procedure more than one reputed scholar has given his benediction.

When stage performances thus follow the lead of "authorita-

* Why not? After all, they think, the artist and the neurotic are cut from the same piece of cloth: "The neurotic is an artist become effeminate, and the artist, a neurotic who has become more manly" ⁶—including, no doubt, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Willa Cather! The noted analyst Brill avers that all poets remain "on a pregenital level," since poetry is an oral outlet because it is but "a chewing and sucking of nice words and phrases" (poetry, obviously, is never concerned with ideas); and even when a few poets do "progress to the genital state of development," they "nevertheless show the result of fixation in the oral, urethral and anal-sadistic stages of the libido development." ⁷ (How lucky are the stars of the average citizen, who escapes the horrors attendant on the composition of poetry!) Freud himself, eloquent on *Hamlet*, did not neglect the other plays. *Macbeth*, for instance, is basically a study of contrasts between sterility (Macbeth had no children) and fecundity (Banquo had a son). ⁸ Later psychoanalysts are more beguiling. Samples: "Shakespeare's women are his mother—Gertrude, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, Juliet, the Shrew." ⁹ (What a composite portrait!) Desdemona is an almost masculine woman, as shown in Othello's greeting her as "O my fair warrior!" (no humor allowed!); she is a good example of "female penis envy . . . the regret of the female child that she does not have a sex organ equal to that of the boy. . . . No analyst will fail to recognize a typical expression of this penis envy in the behavior and the words of Desdemona as Othello reports them: *Still the house affairs would draw her*, etc. Desdemona's penis envy is expressed not only in her wish to be a man as brave and noble as Othello, but also in the fact that she *takes the scarcely concealed initiative in the courting*" ¹⁰ !!!

tive" commentators, it is difficult to quarrel with the good intentions of the director. Theoretically it is the business of the scholars to light the path for Shakespearean performers. Alas, in practice scholarly vagaries often lead performances into quagmires. A dreadful example may be found in what has happened as a result of a proposal of Professor J. Dover Wilson, acknowledged as legislator in matters Shakespearean. For no very good reason, Wilson found the *Get thee to a nunnery* scene as printed in editions of *Hamlet* up to 1935 utterly puzzling.¹¹ In a book that has since been taken as Gospel, he makes an absurd suggestion which nearly all directors of *Hamlet* have adopted, to the further confusion of matters.

It will be remembered that in the second scene of Act II, Polonius assures the King and Queen that he has made a great discovery: Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet's love has been responsible for the Prince's strange conduct, and Hamlet, repulsed,

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Then to a watch,* thence to a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness whereon now he raves.

Polonius goes on to offer to prove his theory. While Hamlet is walking there in the lobby some time soon, he can arrange to "loose" Ophelia to the Prince; Polonius and the King, meanwhile, can hide behind the tapestry and listen to the conversation.

Professor Wilson insists that, in order to explain Hamlet's later treatment of Ophelia, the Prince must overhear this little plot. Just before the lines in question (II, ii, 162-4), therefore, he inserts a new stage direction:

Hamlet, disorderly attired and reading a book, enters the lobby by the door at the back; he hears voices from the chamber and pauses beside one of the curtains, unobserved.¹²

It should be added that Professor Wilson regards this not as a new stage direction but as the "restoration" of a lost one.

Gielgud immediately availed himself of this new piece of busi-

* sleeplessness.

ness in his presentation of *Hamlet* and, since the Gielgud production, most directors have followed suit, so that it is highly probable that most playgoers now think that this "overhearing" by Hamlet of Polonius' plan was Shakespeare's own intention.

This is not the place to go into the gratuitousness of Professor Wilson's "restoration," or into how hopelessly confusing it renders the scene it intended to clarify—Hamlet's interview with Ophelia. Mr. Gielgud's own experience of Hamlet's "overhearing" is eloquent of the fatuity of the device. "I do not think it clarified the meaning sufficiently to warrant the trouble we took with it at rehearsals," he says. ". . . I was continually struck with the feeling when playing this scene that if Shakespeare had meant Hamlet to overhear something, he would surely have made it clear in the text [i. e., other than in a—'restored'—stage direction]. The play has much spying in it . . . but in each case it is Hamlet who is spied upon. I think it unlikely that Shakespeare would weaken this characteristic feature of his play by making Hamlet spy on, or overhear, any other character before the more important point of his enemies' spying on him had been definitely registered with the audience."¹³ Everything Mr. Gielgud says here is sound, though the failure of his experiment seems unknown to his successors. Hamlet's enemies spy upon him; if Hamlet were also to "overhear" them, eavesdropping would become a tendency in the play, and a note of the ludicrous would thereby inevitably intrude upon the tragic mood. Esthetically Professor Wilson's "restoration" is indefensible, for it makes Hamlet's eavesdropping *accidental*—unlike the spying to which he is subjected. Noble tragedies (see Chapter II) do not rely upon such accidents for serious consequences. Here such a one would be a cheap trick, especially if it could furnish, as Professor Wilson says it does, "the mainspring of the events that follow."¹⁴ *

This case is but one of many in which Shakespearean scholar-

* Such tricks are acceptable in comedy—Shakespeare uses them deliciously in *Much Ado About Nothing*. There is, of course, an "overhearing" scene in *Othello*, but there the Moor *agrees* to eavesdrop on Cassio and Iago; it is by plan, not accident. Moreover, *Othello* "discovers" nothing from what he hears; his mind is already poisoned, and the conversation to which he listens only confirms what he already believes.

ship has operated in the direction of distorting Shakespeare's meaning.

If, then, I wish to sponsor publicly a theory of *Hamlet*, it is only out of a profound conviction that the theory describes what Shakespeare intended the play to mean. Could I not anticipate his approval of this book when we meet in the Elysian Fields, so far as I can safely anticipate anything, I would destroy it before it ever saw the light of publication.

This view of *Hamlet* has been tested by the challenge of many generations of alert students in my classes. At the beginning I was worried enough at having to teach a *Hamlet* like no one else's, and was conscious of how silly that must appear in a young man. It fell immediately to my lot to teach Shakespeare every semester, summers included (until teachers' salaries were a little improved), from that time on. And every semester the experimental method only validated and fortified and made more real the meaning which had revealed itself. After a while it became clear that this interpretation of *Hamlet* must be for me the correct one. Three decades have elapsed since that first experiment, and while I have been able to add details and to deepen immeasurably the dimensions of the play in my understanding, I have found no reason to alter the original conception in its larger outlines. Indeed, it has become firmer with the years. In a whimsical mood, Alfred Drake, one of my old pupils and now a bright star on Broadway, once complained that he had to pass up a chance to do *Hamlet* in New York because he could never do any *Hamlet* other than the one he studied with me, and despaired of convincing any director to try it. In his dressing rooms all over the country he has been converting a generation of young actors, and they have succumbed. During a recent run of *Kismet* for several seasons, many in the cast were instructed by him in a line-by-line reading of the play, and when Alfred went to London to re-create his great success in *Kismet*, he started converting young English actors in the company too.

I am no longer a young man, and no longer self-conscious about having a totally new view of *Hamlet*. It is time, therefore, for me to go to print. I feel that this new-old *Hamlet* of Shakespeare's is a far more stirring and exalted play than the stage in my time has seen. I shall never cease to admire the genius of Mr. Gielgud or of

the late John Barrymore in their performances; acting could not be more admirable than was theirs—but it was not Shakespeare's *Hamlet* they gave us. The play Shakespeare wrote is a far more important work than directors and commentators have depressed it into seeming to be.

There is yet another service I aspire to perform for the world's greatest poet. Is there anyone who does not admire Shakespeare? But, ah, how many do not love him, the most lovable of all the world's poets! It is a curious fact that two kinds of people know and love him: the simplest and most untutored folk everywhere, and the most cultivated. All over the world people who can barely read their native languages know and love Shakespeare; countless Italians who would not dare approach the Papa Dante they worship by name, are familiar with Shakespeare in Italian translation. Needless to say, the most refined tastes in literature can never be satisfied if he is excluded. But the vast majority of Shakespeare-idolators really love him not at all. What crimes the grammar schools and high schools have committed against him! How thoroughly the schoolma'ams have alienated all possible interest in the most rewarding of all writers! They speak of him as if he were a combination of *Self-Help* and *Poor Richard's Almanac*. (What will happen to the plays now that the comic books have been encouraged to aid the educational process, one shudders to think.) They debase the dramas into horrid little Sunday-school exercises: *King Lear* teaches one to be kind to one's father, and *Hamlet* to be true to one's self. One almost wishes for a dictator's fiat forbidding the teaching of Shakespeare below the college level. How is it possible to make comprehensible to immature minds the most adult writing ever penned? What high-school teacher, for example, could succeed in making a murderer credible as the hero of a tragedy for his students, even if he was unusual enough to know that Brutus is the central character in *Julius Caesar*? To make anything like a story out of the work for the youngsters it is common to transform Antony (sometimes Caesar) into the hero and Brutus into the villain; what happens to poor Cassius in the process is too painful to relate.

Yet, in more than thirty years of college teaching I have found that every young man and woman old enough to have observed a little of life can be depended upon to love Shakespeare once the

plays are given a chance to speak for themselves. I have never taught a boy or girl who did not capitulate to Shakespeare's magic. It is the schoolma'ams who have been killing interest in him. It is their large group—they who have eyes and see not—which goes to the theater to see Shakespeare in the same spirit in which many go to church—not at all religiously, I mean, but out of a sense of duty to be performed. Shakespeare is not to be approached as a divinity, but as the human being who possessed the warmest humanity on record. He is not to be read as though he were an Immanuel Kant. He is better than that. He is the world's greatest poet and dramatist, and he knew more about human relationships than anyone who has ever written about them; and we can learn more about other people and ourselves through an understanding reading of him than we could gather in ten lifetimes of personal experience. But we must come to him with some experience to begin with; and, above all, unless we come with our humanity ready to be touched and exercised, it is better not to come to him at all.

I know of a simple man, a stockbroker in Wall Street, who has read very little. But some years ago he discovered Shakespeare. And in him he found compensation for all the catastrophic harassment of a life that has been peculiarly bitter. He carries around in his pocket a little black loose-leaf notebook into which he has carefully copied out his favorite passages. He lovingly weighs and tests a passage for months before it is admitted into his golden thesaurus. And he has confessed to me that he feels lost unless his little book is in his pocket, for he counts on it every day to nourish his spirit. I imagine that the "other service" I wish to perform with this volume will be understood when I say that I hope this study will make my broker-friend seem not at all odd but very wise.

Naturally, one apologizes profoundly for daring to believe that one understands *Hamlet* thoroughly. Really, once the dirty pail of water is emptied, the water in the well will prove quite clear. First, then, we must see how muddied the water actually is, in the chapter entitled *Confusion Worse Confounded*; after that, in *The Cloak of Night Plucked Off* we shall empty the muddied water a little at a time; thereafter we shall draw from Shakespeare's own clear well. Before we do any of this, however, since we seem these days to have forgotten the flavor of pure tragedy, we had better drink of its

fresh springs, so that we may keep with us the taste of the waters we mean to carry home. This we do in the next chapter, *Melpomene*, where we shall dig through current misconceptions of tragedy and literary techniques, aided by the tool of many a sharp footnote, until our springs begin to bubble.

It is to the average well-read man and woman that the address is made, unhampered by the heavy load of Shakespearean commentary. I am anxious, inevitably, for the ear of the scholar as well; but of him I must ask the enormous task of forgetting what he thinks he knows until I have done with my case. And for the case—which is Shakespeare's, not mine—I ask indulgence if *Melpomene* is minded to quote the authority with which he may be all-too-familiar.

I shall not conceal from the reader of the following pages, however I may try, that *Hamlet* has come to be for me the most important work to be understood in the world of literature. It is certainly the richest and most profoundly rewarding creation of the human spirit. No one can read it understandingly without reaping endless personal benefits. I feel that the accumulation of scholarship on *Hamlet*, to shift my image, has effectively

enclosed with stone,
with double stone and triple

this treasure-hoard, and I conceive that my chief task must be to demolish these walls so that the treasure may be reached. I do my predecessors the credit of believing that they too were moved by a similar desire to reach to Shakespeare's play itself. I expect them to forgive me if I have used their arguments as implements of destruction. All weapons that can afford one entry through those impregnable ramparts I gladly seize.

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SOME INNATE IMPULSE TO . . . NOT LET HUMAN DIGNITY
DOWN AT A PINCH KEPT HIM RESOLVED TO HOLD ON.

C. E. Montague, *Action*

II *Melpomene: the Nature of Tragedy*

A DISTASTE for all tragedy is sufficiently common among the vulgar. "Life is depressing enough," runs the platitude; "why go to the theater to be reminded of the fact? Give us Abbott and Costello or the Marx Brothers." Yet people of some sensitivity, while not necessarily eschewing low comedy, do find gratification in tragedy. They do not go to it to be depressed—that would be an idiotic exercise for anyone!—but because they find themselves, at the end of a good tragedy, emerging from the theater in a mood of chastened exaltation, a mood which makes life seem not less sad but more understandable and easier to bear—a mood which would be very difficult to define, had not Aristotle already so perfectly defined it.

Now, it is not implied that one who is enthralled by *Oedipus Tyrannus* could not delight in the antics of the Brothers Marx. The demands of the human spirit are—luckily for the arts!—extensive. No one who willingly suffers with Lear will therefore the less enjoy roaring at Falstaff's ribaldry another day. There is nothing anomalous in a man's being elevated by *Parsifal* on Good Friday and anticipating eagerly a performance of *The Bartered Bride* a week later.*

* Thus (*Patience*):

"DUKE. Tell me, Major, are you fond of toffee?"

It is precisely because the tragic summons into play the most exalted capacities of the human spirit that it has been traditionally approached in a holy-day disposition.

We rightfully expect, the point is, from each of the multitudinous experiences available to us, the reward uniquely pertaining to it. The pleasures of a cool swim on a hot day defy analogy with the pleasures of a tennis match; those of champagne with those of a planked steak. We do not seek from painting what we receive from music. We no more expect to procure from Leonardo what we receive from Rubens than we expect to procure from the *Mass in B Minor* what we receive from *The Marriage of Figaro*.

If as a result of its peculiar resources no one of the arts can deliver the same meanings and comforts as another, and if because of the inevitable circumscriptions imposed by subject and technique no two works in the same art (or by the same artist) can convey identical meanings, it is none the less true that the comic spirit and the tragic spirit have each its own qualifications, and these cut across the limits of the various arts. Plainly, there were affinities of purpose in the creation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the Overture to *The Barber of Seville*, the *Would-Be Gentleman*, certain paintings of Hogarth and Breughel and Teniers, *Vanity Fair*, some of Beethoven's *Scherzi*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The affinities are perhaps even stronger in *King Lear*, Beethoven's *Eroica*, *Paradise Lost*, the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Miss Cather's *A Lost Lady*, and the *Saint Matthew Passion*.

MAJOR. Very!

COLONEL. We are all fond of toffee.

ALL (the Dragoons). We are!

DUKE. Yes, and toffee in moderation is a capital thing. But to *live* on toffee—toffee for breakfast, toffee for dinner, toffee for tea—to have it supposed that you care for nothing *but* toffee, and that you would consider yourself insulted if anything but toffee were offered to you—how would you like that?

COLONEL. I can quite believe that under those circumstances, even toffee would become monotonous."¹

For "toffee," read tragedy, melodrama, satire, comedy (high or low) or farce.

That is, we anticipate from the tragic, whatever the art or particular work, a characteristic response. If we miss this response, we have been cheated of our due. Dreiser could call his novel *An American Tragedy*, Mr. Miller could present *Death of a Salesman* as a new kind of tragedy, Mr. Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba* may have been hailed as a stirring tragedy—but moving though they may be, sincere as they unquestionably are, saddening or depressing as they have been found, tragedies they are not. For they do not fulfill the high function of tragedy, which, as Aristotle understood, is to provide for us “through pity and fear” the “proper purgation of these emotions.”

It is to be hoped that no one will deem it stranger that Aristotle, because he lived twenty-three hundred years ago, could have precisely stated for all times * the purpose of tragedy than that Archimedes should not much later have discovered, as the world acknowledges he did discover, the fundamentals of hydromechanics on the famous occasion when he took a bath. Indeed, there is nothing at all odd in the fact that an “ancient” Greek should have understood the function of tragedy, when we remember how vital a part of civic life the witnessing of tragedy was to an Athenian.

Aristotle lived in an era peculiarly favorable, even for a man of his extraordinary sagacity, for the statement of eternal principles concerning tragedy. He was not in the position of that notorious German savant who wrote a disquisition on the elephant.† He did not

* One must defend oneself against the contemporary tendency to consider everything written before 1950 outdated. One is no longer astonished to find a pair of critics say of a masterful story and its author that he “died in 1928 but this story . . . is as vital as when it was written.”² This in 1953! Accelerate this tempo a little and a man may expect his literary reputation “may outlive his life half a year.”

† Though it can hardly be possible, there may be some fortunate who has not heard one of the many versions of this celebrated tale. If so, it seems only fair to deprive him herewith of that felicity: A number of eminent representatives of various cultures were asked to write a treatise on the elephant. The Englishman bade his man pack his traps, went off to Africa, lived with the elephant and hunted him; after six months he returned to England and wrote a book entitled *Elephant-Hunting in Africa*. The Frenchman went to the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, where he spent two

have to evolve the principles of tragedy or decide out of hand what they ought to be. He lived in the age immediately following the enormous dramatic productivity that had begun with Aeschylus and continued with Sophocles, Euripides, and their contemporaries, who had been providing the Athenian citizens with their yearly experience of spiritual purgation. All he had to do, therefore, was to ask himself: What are the basic attributes of tragedy as exhibited in the works of these masters? What, despite the wide differences of their approaches to tragedy, had they all understood tragedy to be? Aristotle had only, thus, to deduce from many masterworks (the vast majority of which have been lost to us) just what is the *sine qua non* of tragedy—and that he managed to perfection.

To begin with, Aristotle implies quite plainly what constituted the role of tragedy in the life of the Athenian citizen. Tragedy had had a long and important history as a rite connected with the worship of the god Dionysus; by the time of the Golden Age in Athens, when the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles were presented in the Theater of Dionysus, and tragedy, as Aristotle says, had found at last its "natural form," its function was both religious and medicinal. It would be fair to say that the ceremony of attending the tragedies in Athens during the festival of Dionysus was the religious equivalent of the Hebraic-Christian practice of fasting on the Day of Atonement or during Lent. The citizenry of Athens came to the theater on those days to achieve *katharsis*, purgation. The Athenian way of achieving spiritual cleansing was, of course, basically opposed to the Hebraic-Christian. The latter involves self-condemnation, the acknowledgment of personal sin, the beating of the evil back into the breast; the Greek, letting the sin flow out of one's system, the getting rid of the evil by affording it a channel through which to depart. (It is difficult to refrain from the conviction that psychiatrists might have starved from lack of patients in those days!)

Doubtless in more primitive times this purgation was achieved

industrious years, after which he published a two-volume work, *bien documentée*, entitled *L'Éléphant et Ses Amours*. The Jew, naturally, wrote a treatise on *The Elephant and Zionism*. The German simply went home, asked his *frau* to make him a huge pot of black coffee, sat at the dining-room table, and there, the story concludes, *out of his inner consciousness* he evolved an elephant.

through the unlimited license then endorsed during the Dionysian revels. But by the time of Aeschylus such merely animal methods were no longer adequate, and tragedy provided the perfect vehicle for the rite of *katharsis*. Then the Athenian went to the theater to participate in the tragic deed of some noble hero or heroine (tragedy rises above even the difference of sex); as he watched and hearkened he *became* Oedipus or Clytemnestra or Creon or Electra or Eteocles—he suffered with each, he experienced heroic passions, he fell spiritually as each hero or heroine fell—yet he remained safe in body and secure from guilt in soul. He became blind vicariously with Oedipus, but still had his own eyes; he helped direct Orestes' sword with Electra but himself rested innocent of the worst of all crimes, a mother's murder.*

* If the modern skeptic finds it difficult to accept the possibility of a whole population's being as aesthetic-minded as we here imply, let him recall the incomparable architecture, the hundreds of great tragedies and sculptures produced under the patronage of these people. Let him remember that it was Aeschylus, the sublimest poet among the tragedians, and Sophocles, the sublimest dramatist, to whom this populace with its applause most often awarded the coveted prize. There is no way of accounting for it, but despite our own empirical knowledge of the shabbiness of popular taste, we cannot deny that in that age the Athenians were an astonishing people. (Though still among the most charming people in the world, one can no longer say the same for their taste. Paying lip-reverence to their classical culture, they are now much more interested in their dull Byzantine past. As for their apprehension of beauty—! One will find the Acropolis fairly clear of Greeks on most days; they are busy trotting visitors off to see and admire an atrocity decorating the grave of a maiden buried in their Cemetery Number One, the work of a modern sculptor, depicting the lady lying near death on her couch, the folds of the sheet being so realistic that they seem actually to have been used a week! Around this horror crowds are always to be seen gaping in astounded delight.) The story of Sophocles' trial could have been true nowhere else and in no other era. The ninety-year-old dramatist was sued by his son, in an attempt to break Sophocles' will in favor of his illegitimate son's family, on a charge of his being mentally incompetent. In answer, the great old man simply read in court a passage from the masterpiece on which he was then engaged, *Oedipus at Colonus*, the tribute to Colonus, his native town. The court was so much moved by the magnificence of the poetry that the case was dismissed at once, and Sophocles

And such must always be the function of tragedy. We all accumulate poisons from the inescapable frustrations of daily living; our disasters are wont (and for this we might offer thanks) to be only petty and mean; we are not allotted the scope for expending ourselves on noble issues; we do not experience grand catastrophes, and thus venoms overflow within us and quench the inner light. We come, then, to tragedy for purgation from our spiritual ills. By participating in a noble tragedy such as our life does not afford, but Hamlet or Lear or Oedipus do enact, we come away chastened and cleansed, better prepared to take up the burdens of the day.

To speak in this manner is to speak of the social import of literature with validity. In truth, it is only when the arts fulfill their aesthetic obligations that they *can* be socially useful. We once knew a cellist, member of a string quartet, who professed despair, as was fashionable in the late 'thirties, over his inability to coordinate his "social conscience" with his music. How, for instance, was he to make a *Razoumovsky Quartet* contributory to social progress? When we were beginning to tire of these impasses of his and of his masochistic cries of *mea culpa*, we were struck with the perfect solution for his dilemma—though he considered it merely flippant. "If you really want to help the progress of humanity," we offered, "why don't you learn to play the cello better than you do?"

There has been much nonsense written in the twentieth century by critics who have given their economic, sociological, psychoanalytical—and most absurd of all—"Marxist" interpretations of the arts. What they have had to say may or may not be a contribution to economics, sociology, psychoanalysis, or history—but it is worse than irrelevant to the arts, worse even than merely vulgar. Worse, for it has been responsible for innumerable acts of mayhem against the arts and artists alike. Aesthetically-minded people are more, not less, sensitive to calls upon their conscience from the sufferings of humanity. It is easy to distract them from the creative fields in which

carried home in honor to his dwelling. Where else could this have happened but in the Athens of his day?

Public taste, of course, has not at all times been at low ebb. It is well to remember that with the Elizabethan butcher, baker, and candlestick-maker, Shakespeare was the most popular playwright of the day.

they labor, with the reproof: "Is this a time to be concerned with such irrelevance as beauty?" That is a question which might just as appropriately have been asked of Dante, Watteau, or Brahms. For in what era have not suffering, carnage, and deprivation been abroad? Luckily for the world, such men have usually understood that there is sustenance man is always in need of, quite as much as of bread—sustenance they could endow us with only by cultivating unapologetically their best gifts. They have known that the riches they pour out for us must be for more than one era. It is not that one denies the possible value of making posters, marching songs, or bitter plays which will move men to picket for the thirty-hour week and higher wages. We all approve of decreased taxes, adequate defense, better sanitation, and municipal housing—and for such ends comedy and satire can agitate. Tragedy cannot. It does something more important. When high-minded creators, pushed to the wall by this class of critics, do less nobly than they could in order to propagandize against a social ill, let them consider whether the temporary disease they would cure is more pressing than that unceasing accumulation of spiritual frustrations that every man and every woman harbors within, and for which tragedy and the tragic spirit are the best anodynes. Even when we conquer the moon, as it seems we must, these frustrations will continue to require easement—in all probability, more than ever.

As for the various sociological interpretations of tragedies extant, how can such commentary illuminate or facilitate by a jot the experience for which tragedy is created? Of what avail is it to relate *Othello* to Shakespeare's economic status, personal marital experiences, social class, subconscious involvements? The purposes for which *Othello* exists are in no way affected by such knowledge; for, to begin with, and to end with, *Othello* fulfills the purposes of tragedy. It can therefore, for every man and every woman, purify the spirit, give insight into life, and bestow courage for the tensions of living. For these are the function of tragedy, and surely no nobler service is performed by any other kind of human activity. If this be error and upon us proved, we never writ nor no man ever suffered.

And these things it can do only by operating, as Aristotle observes, through the agency of the individual audience's emotions of pity and fear. Pity is self-explanatory. But what is this "fear," this

phobos? The word used to be translated as "terror"; but nowadays "terror" is too much associated with sliding panels and disappearing staircases to be serviceable. This fear, which might perhaps be better rendered into modern English as "awe," is double: awe at man's insignificance in the face of the vast complexity, over which he can exercise no control, of God, Nature, and society—a complexity in the face of which he seems so puny and helpless; and awe, too, at the seed of divinity in man which, despite his very insignificance, prompts him to stand up against adversity, and will not allow him to bend his neck accommodatingly to the axe suspended over him.

A hero who is the victim of the forces operating upon him, who can be crushed by adversity, and who bows before the axe threatening him, may inspire pity but never fear. If Hamlet, however noble, were only the victim of the evil circumstances enmeshing him, and were discomfited by them to the extent that he could neither cope with nor combat them (this is perhaps the most popular of all misconceptions of his character), he would be no tragic hero, for he could inspire no awe, and hence would belong not in the glorious company of Oedipus, Lear, and Othello, but in that of Dickens' Little Nell. Mr. Butcher, although making an exception of Hamlet because he accepts the popular view of that hero's make-up, well says of the character of the tragic hero that it must have "in it some vital and spontaneous force which can make and mold circumstances. . . . It is of the battling, energetic type," and he agrees that "most" of Shakespeare's heroes are of this kind: "strong and dominant natures, they are of a militant quality of mind."³

Pity is not enough for the tragic sentiment—that is the error too many aspirants to tragic writing have not been at pains to circumvent. Pathos, which is easier to evoke than awe, does not by itself provide the tragic *katharsis*; unaccompanied by fear, it tends to depress, not cleanse. It is, moreover, but a step from mere pity for the victim to indignation against his oppressor; and when indignation intrudes powerfully the tragic sentiment is murdered. To be much inflamed against a villain, or society, or things in general—to be greatly indignant—is to be deprived of the curative effects upon the spirit of tragedy's purgation. There are occasions when we ought to be inflamed, no doubt—but they can never be the occasions when we can also be cleansed within. To say, as one must, that *An Ameri-*

can Tragedy and *Death of a Salesman* fall short of their pretensions is to question neither the power of their indictment nor their possible social usefulness; they simply do not rise to the dignity and unique function of tragedy. (Their authors' hopes that somehow these works might manage to encompass both indictment and tragedy have proved vain. The finished creation, like one's children, has a distressing way of being what it is, one's intentions notwithstanding!) The difficult task of combining tragedy and indictment depends for its success on a very delicate balance between these normally opposing elements. Ibsen, who rarely attempted pure tragedy, contrived this balance admirably in *Ghosts*. From this example alone it is possible to deduce that the secret lies in going no further than implication when one indicts in tragedy. In *Ghosts* our prime concern is neither with venereal disease nor the tyranny of the moral values of the past, but with the fall of Mrs. Alving, whose attempts to stand up against those specters are blasted by her own defects of character.

There is, let it be repeated, room for all kinds of expression, and a dramatist may prefer to write a play in the spirit of burning indignation or mockery or gentle raillery, but such a play is bent upon providing something more and a good deal less than the tragic *katharsis*. Ibsen and Chekhov have few peers among world dramatists, and there is no more reason why Ibsen should not have chosen to write *The Wild Duck* in a vein of ironic indictment or why Chekhov should not have chosen to write *The Cherry Orchard* in the comic spirit, than that Shakespeare, because he had written *Hamlet*, need have resisted penning the indignant arraignment of moral hypocrisy of *Measure for Measure*. This is not to charge these plays with artistic inadequacy; *The Wild Duck* is Ibsen at his greatest, *The Cherry Orchard* is beyond need of anyone's praise, and *Measure for Measure* for its poetry alone must ever be priceless. It is merely to remind one that none of them has been conceived in the vein of tragedy. Indeed, *Measure for Measure* and *The Wild Duck* are far more bitter than tragedy must ever attempt to be.

The merely pathetic, then, is not enough—not enough, that is, to solace the human spirit. Indeed, the pursuit of the merely pathetic is likely to skirt dangerously near the boundaries of the sentimental (i.e., false sentiment) and often falls over into it. The borderlines

were not always clear, for instance, to so great an artist as Dickens. *Bleak House* is a great tragic novel if only because it contains Lady Dedlock; *The Old Curiosity Shop*, on the other hand, is vitiated into sentimentality because it contains Little Nell. It is related of Wilde that when someone asked him whether he had not been profoundly affected by the demise of Little Nell, he answered that a man must have a heart of stone who could read those pages without dying of laughter. Thus, mere pathos may have so little dignity as to defeat its own ends. Pity without fear cannot make for tragedy.

Now, as we have implied, the pity and fear required of us, the audience, are expressed chiefly during the course of our self-identification with the hero of a tragedy. As we attend the tragedy, *we* must be Lear, Electra, or Hamlet, so that at the conclusion we may feel that us the play

with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent.⁴ *

This hero, as Aristotle knew, must have certain qualifications, or else this self-identification on the part of the audience cannot take place. He cannot be a completely "virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity," for that would only excite indignation—or, as Aristotle puts it, "it merely shocks us." Nor can he be a "bad man

* These famous lines, perfectly expressing the audience's ideal reaction to the fall of a tragic hero (in this play, Samson), were dictated by one of the earliest of the moderns to understand truly the meaning of Aristotle's words. Indeed, Milton, in the Foreword to *Samson Agonistes*, strongly emphasizes the curative, the medicinal function of tragedy when he says of tragedy that it "hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems (i.e., forms of literary composition); therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. Nor is Nature wanting in her own effects to make good his assertion: for so in phisic things of melancholic hue and quality are used against melancholy, sour against sour, salt to remove salt humors."

passing from adversity to prosperity," for that "possesses no single tragic quality"—we should be indignant here too, though for quite different reasons. Nor can he be an utter villain whose downfall we witness, for at that we should rejoice. The kind of hero with whom alone we can identify ourselves is one extreme in neither virtue nor vice, a man essentially good, whose misfortunes are brought about "by some error or frailty"—*hamartia*, as the Greek has it, the famous "tragic flaw" of literary parlance. "The single Greek word *hamartia*," as Mr. Lane Cooper reminds us, "lays emphasis upon the want of insight within the man, but is elastic enough to mean also the outward fault resulting from it."⁵

That is to say, the hero of a tragedy must be to a considerable extent the author of his own doom; he must fall because of some basic moral weakness. (Aristotle's word for "character" is *ethos*; as he sees it, character in tragedy means "moral constitution.") The hero of a tragedy, in other words, never falls only because of circumstances, Fate, or Destiny, but chiefly through some species of personal ethical blindness. No one can possibly identify himself with a man or woman who suffers catastrophe only through some accident. By definition an accident is a happening that cannot be anticipated, and must therefore necessarily be left out of account. An accident is an occurrence that can be explained by no ordinary human logic, in which we are accustomed to move from cause to effect. When a man suffers accident the cause is outside his control and we cannot put ourselves in his place. For these reasons, in a world of ever-recurring accidents we are all compelled to live as though they did not occur; if we were not, in dread of the unpredictable we should never dare to step out of our houses—indeed, should never dare move from a chair, which, moreover, would have to be discreetly placed well out of the possible descent of a chandelier.

There is no misconception more prevalent than the vulgar one which credits the classic Greek tragedies with exhibiting the remorseless operation of Fate. Many careless textbooks have perpetuated this untruth, and book reviewers are forever describing some modern work showing the agency of blind Destiny as being in that respect "like a Greek tragedy." Poor Oedipus is always being subpoenaed as an analogy for the hero of such a book. In point of fact, no tragic hero is more completely the author of his own doom

than Oedipus; he builds his own funeral pyre log by log, impelled as he is by his *hamartia*, his tragic flaw—overweeningness, heedlessness, wilfulness.

Consider his actions, as they are revealed to us in the play. Raised by the king and queen of Corinth as their son, he was disturbed at a feast by a drunkard's slighting insinuations about his origins. Oedipus begged the King and Queen to reveal the facts of his birth, but their answers were so evasive that he journeyed to the oracle to learn the truth. But, characteristically, the oracle answered a question he had not asked, and it spoke of his murdering his father and committing incest with his mother. Horrified at these words, in order to escape such a fate Oedipus vowed never to return to Corinth. Although virtuous, Oedipus was however also an exceedingly heedless man. Since he had consulted the oracle only because he was unsure of his parentage, he could, if completely rational, also have taken care, to avoid the terrible future prophesied, never to kill any man old enough to be his father and never to mate with any woman clearly older than himself. Yet before long, refusing to clear the road for Laius' carriage, he slew his father in a fit of wrath; and soon thereafter he recklessly allowed himself to be wedded to the widowed Jocasta, his mother. It is beside the point that he did not know either to be his actual parents. He had been given sufficient warning for him to have avoided both deeds.* Read in any other light than through these facts, which are a part of Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Tyrannus* will never mean what its author intended or its original audiences understood. Oedipus a victim of Fate would not be a tragic Oedipus, only a pathetic one.†

* There is nowhere a more brilliant study of this play than in Professor H. D. F. Kitto's *Greek Tragedy* (2d edition, revised, London, 1950), pp. 135-41. He says, "Sophocles is not trying to make us feel that an inexorable destiny or a malignant god is guiding the events."

† The same sort of admonition must be made about *Romeo and Juliet*, a play almost universally misunderstood. The fault here is somewhat Shakespeare's. He was still near the beginning of his career, was writing his first good tragedy, and unsure of himself (as the verse's alternation between lyrical sublimity and fumbling fatuousness demonstrates). In this play he toyed with the idea of setting a prologue before each act, but apparently gave up after writing only two—which he

Since accidents do occur they are naturally represented in tragedy. They could hardly fail to be. For, in a manner of speaking, everything that happens to an individual, everything that occurs without his first having willed it, is an "accident," whether it be the unheralded appearance of a human being at one's threshold or the lateness of the morning train. But such accidents, whatever their consequences—and we are aware that the tardiness of a train may be but the first of a series of destructive events—in tragedy must be represented (if they contribute to the catastrophe) as cooperating with the hero's tragic flaw. For instance, the lateness of a train may contribute to tragic catastrophe if we feel it is our hero's characteristic fault that, knowing the undependability of the company's services, he made no provision for the contingency of lateness. Or, the sudden appearance of another human being at the threshold may contribute to our hero's fall if we feel that some aspect of their relationship is owing to a defect in our hero's character. In short, in a tragedy it is the hero's personal shortcoming which starts the rocks tumbling down the cliff; and accidents of time and place may convert the inconsequential falling of a few rocks into a destructive avalanche. Tragedy ever reminds us that each man lives in a world over which his control begins abruptly to cease in the area contiguous to the exterior side of his own skin. It is disastrously unlucky that Desdemona loses the handkerchief precisely when she does lose it: her handkerchief lost on any other day might have caused no trouble at all; on that particular day Othello because of his tragic flaw has already allowed his mind to be poisoned against her. But, on the other hand, were Othello other than he is and she other than she is, no catastrophe need have ensued because of that loss. It is dis-

would have done wisely to remove; they are of no consequence to the tragedy. Unhappily the first prologue speaks of Romeo and Juliet as "a pair of star-crossed lovers," and the phrase has been taken up by criticism without regard to the transactions of the plot. It is a far better play than the words imply. If the love of Romeo and Juliet were crossed only by their evil stars, they would be merely victims of circumstances, not tragic figures, as they are. They would be two well-meaning weaklings with whom we cannot possibly identify ourselves. As it is, the work clearly exhibits them falling as a result of the tragic flaw they both share—heedlessness.

trously unlucky for Macbeth (and for Duncan too!) as well as for Lady Macbeth that the King comes to stay at their castle on that of all nights: on any other occasion Macbeth might not have been steeled for the bloody deed; on that night he was prepared to murder. On the other hand, people do accept the hospitality of those whom they have benefited, arise without a gash the next morning, hale and hearty, and leave their hosts in no danger of the electric chair. In tragedy, the hero's tragic flaw sows a wind that reaps the whirlwind.

The classic tragic flaw, the *hamartia* exhibited by the heroes and heroines of Greek tragedy, is some species of rashness, or as Mr. Butcher tentatively states it, an "error of judgment arising from a hasty or careless view of the special case; an error which in some degree is morally culpable, as it might have been avoided."⁶ For us "overweeningness" or "heedlessness" is the most satisfactory designation in our language for the rashness found in the classic tragic hero.* Tragedy reminds us, because of the fatal overweeningness of the hero, of the necessity of remaining modest before the gods. We must never for a minute forget, no matter how favorable appearances may be to us, that we can hardly manage ourselves, much less the rest of the world. The tragic hero is a man whom we admire, often love, but who at a crucial moment—even as you and I

* Mr. Butcher would probably not be quite satisfied with either word. He knows that Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* was in Aristotle's judgment the ideal tragedy,⁷ and therefore feels that any description of *hamartia* must be one to account for the hero of that play—a view in which we heartily concur. But, incredibly enough, this great scholar actually can say of Oedipus: "His character was not the determining factor in his fortunes. He, if any man, was in a genuine sense the victim of circumstances."⁸ Hence, Professor Butcher decides that the meaning of *hamartia* cannot be, after all, limited to "either a defect of character or a single passionate or inconsiderate act,"⁹ and must include the possibility of an error for which the hero is not responsible.¹⁰ Thus the door is opened to mere accident as the cause of the tragic catastrophe, and hence to the banishing of all possible self-identification with the hero. The conception of *Oedipus Tyrannus* earlier discussed in this chapter brings the play into uniformity with the rest of Greek tragic drama, as it unquestionably must have been for Aristotle, who admired it above all other tragedies,

—forgets discretion, has the illusion that he can manipulate a course of events just because he chooses to view them a certain way. Oedipus is brave, fearless, and generous, but he is utterly reckless about his own conduct; because he *intends* to avoid the crimes predicted by the oracle, he feels foolishly safe and takes insufficient precautions to prevent their commission. The oracle is no more responsible for the crimes he commits than the three witches are for Macbeth's murdering Duncan. Oracle and witches are simply the voice of the vast complex of affairs, full of pitfalls for all of us, the voice that warns us to moderate our wilfulness and live with intelligence. Catastrophic for us if we feel so superior to the world's chances that we disregard the warning or prefer to interpret it as a signal to plunge ahead wherever our will would lead us! Indeed, as the truth narrows inch by inch closer to Oedipus, we see him questioning himself less than ever; rather, that characteristic overweeningness of his makes him turn against Creon, who only wishes him well, and against sightless Tiresias, whose only guilt is that he sees the truth to which Oedipus (though in possession of his eyes) blinds himself. For all his qualities, Oedipus is a stubborn man who cannot be prevented from destroying his own peace. Such a man is Lear, who out of similar stubbornness turns against Cordelia and Kent, who love him most, just because they speak truth too bluntly to be palatable to his bad temper. Such an overweening man is Othello; pure of soul, if ever man was, lofty in principle, courageous, wholly unselfish and unassuming, he yet permits himself to forget all he has reason to know his wife to be ("My life upon her faith!"),¹¹ and, having lost his judgment, allows his overwrought emotions to lead him to disaster. This overweeningness destroys Romeo and Juliet; we are not disposed to hold it against them when first love precipitates them into recklessness, as we cannot hold it against Lear, Othello, and Oedipus that they are overweening, for these are beings who evoke our affection, not our censure; but we are forced to recognize, if we understand Shakespeare's play correctly, that had Romeo and Juliet taken a few pains to conciliate their families, who were all too ready to make peace, their love might have ended happily.

It is interesting to observe that we can identify ourselves only with men and women who have such flaws, and not at all with a

flawless character. It is not only because we know privately how imperfect we are. It is rather because a flawless man, if he suffers catastrophe, having no error that can bring about his doom, can fall only through forces external to himself, i.e., by accident or Fate. As graphic illustration we may consult the difference in our feelings about the deaths of Paris and Romeo in the same play. Romeo is far from perfect. Before he meets Juliet, he is obviously insincere, a mooncalf in love with love, affected—is saved from being a bore, indeed, only because his faults are so common to youth. Paris, on the other hand, is an entirely attractive character, and remains so throughout the play. A lesser artist, since our sympathies are to be with Romeo, would have made a rival lover something of a villain. But Shakespeare has strengthened the pathos by making us feel that, barring the fact that she does not love him, Juliet might do much worse than marry Paris. His love for her is beyond question; he is respectful to Capulet; he is forbearing at Friar Lawrence's cell when Juliet is almost rude to him, and answers her curtness with gentlest affection; he is overwhelmed with grief at the news of her supposed death; and the depth of his affections is to be gauged by his quietly going to pay his obsequies with perfumed water, flowers, and devotion when she has been entombed, and vowing to continue these services to her memory nightly thereafter. He is killed only because he wishes to protect the sanctity of the dead from what he conceives to be the vengeance of a Montague. He is innocent of a single unpleasant trait or deed. He knows of no marriage between the lovers, is even unaware they have met. He is a person entirely sinned against, a fact untrue of Romeo. And yet we cannot identify ourselves with Paris because, entirely admirable though he is, he is only a victim of circumstance. While with Romeo, who is less ideal than Paris, we can identify ourselves because he is the author of his own doom, because he possesses a tragic flaw. This paradox is quite characteristic of true tragedy.

There are other qualifications for the tragic hero besides this *hamartia*. Though most of the subjects of Greek tragedy were taken from the treasuries of mythology, Aristotle wisely observes that tragedy need not confine itself to traditional stories. But, because of the plays he knew, he suggested that the tragic hero should be one "highly renowned and prosperous." This dictum was perverted

during the English Restoration to mean only high social rank, and in that distorted garb fathered many a dull so-called Heroic Tragedy in which the hero owned no distinction beyond his being a prince and nourishing a propensity toward pompous oratory—a man unable to arouse any sympathy. A man of social eminence with the soul of a mouse cannot be tragic. No one is a candidate for tragedy just because his name appears in the *Almanac de Gotha* or the *Social Register*—a fact no one there listed will deplore. The heroes “highly renowned and prosperous” of Greek lore were, of course, men and women of position, but they were renowned even more for their personal accomplishments and qualities. We must, therefore, in consequence of literary experience since then, modify Aristotle’s suggestion to include men and women, whatever their rank in society, who are *above the average in personal qualities*. Thomas Hardy’s Jude, though of humblest origin, is a true tragic hero by power of his unconquerable thirst for learning and a larger life, the unyielding search for which raises him above his fellows. Social position is not a basic requirement for a tragic hero; what is essential is an internal quality which sets him apart from the herd—which makes him, in short, not bend his head to the axe, as the average man will do. The same spiritual superiority of his heroes in Conrad’s novels rates these stories among the noblest tragic works in fiction, perhaps the best in English in the last three-quarters of a century—those simple, sometimes even rough, souls who when adverse fortune corners them prefer to go down to disaster rather than part with a few rags of personal honor, all they have to cover themselves with in their dolorous pass. The death of these men is a loss to the world; the world is poorer for their falling from its ranks. So, while Jude and Lord Jim are tragic characters, Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths and Mr. Miller’s Salesman are not, because, though we pity them, their fall involves no loss to humanity, no awe. With the tragic hero something more than himself goes down to defeat.

For this reason we may add that a hero with inner qualities above the average is likely to be a more impressive one if he comes from an important place in society. Such a man involves the destinies of more lives than his own. A tragic hero of rank carries along with him to ruin more than can a man from humbler walks of life. The death of Abraham Lincoln, for example, was a greater tragic

fact (for North and South) than the death of any Union or Confederate soldier. Milton had in Samson the perfect symbol for the tragic hero, who when he brings the edifice down upon his own head also causes general ruin. A hero of lofty place is also more tragic because he falls from a greater height; a fall from ten stories is bound to be more catastrophic than one from a doorstep. The fall of an eagle weighs more with us than the fall of a sparrow. As the Gentleman says of Lear:

A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,
Past speaking of in a king! ¹²

Shakespeare's tragic heroes all satisfy both requirements. They are all men and women superior to the average; and Lear is a king, Macbeth becomes one, Cleopatra is a queen, Hamlet is a prince, Coriolanus and Othello are the very props of the state, Brutus is the cause of civil war, and Romeo and Juliet are the offspring of Verona's two leading families. These two attributes will also be found in the tragic figures who stand close to the central character in importance: Cassius is second only by personal choice to Brutus, Desdemona is the daughter of a leading senator, Lady Macbeth becomes a queen, Cordelia is first a princess and then a queen, and Antony (of *Antony and Cleopatra*) is one of the twin pillars sustaining the world.

Now, since self-identification on the part of the audience with the hero is the root of the cathartic experience in tragedy, how, it may be asked, is one to identify oneself with a man who, unlike ourselves, is above the average? The naturalists * since Zola have indeed maintained that it is with the average man that audiences can more readily identify. Isn't he more like ourselves than General Othello, Prince Hamlet, or King Lear? Isn't his very mediocrity closer to our own experience? Zola, Dreiser, James T. Farrell, Arthur Miller (we exempt the hero of his fine tragedy, *A View from the Bridge*),

* We employ the term despite the objections of some current practitioners of naturalism to being designated otherwise than as realists. They consider "naturalism" an insult. But some word is surely called for to distinguish the method of a Flaubert from that of a Zola, that of a Willa Cather from that of a Dreiser.

William Inge, and their peers have valiantly labored to keep their heroes within the dimensions of averageness and mediocrity. Not only their heroes but their heroes' experiences are run-of-the-mill, within the petty scope of our own everyday experiences. On the face of it, logic would seem to indicate that you and I can more easily be the Salesman or Clyde Griffiths than Prince Hamlet or King Lear. But this is not actually the case, for at least two reasons, one psychological, the other aesthetic.

For a very human cause, no individual can identify himself with an average man as hero. What normal human being ever thinks of himself as average? We may know that the trivialities of our own lives will not bear objective representation; modesty, for instance, bids us remember that the occasion on which we missed a step and sprained an ankle could be a dramatic one only to ourselves. But just the same we are all aware of stately potentialities for tragedy, all kinds of noble capacities which the world ignores in us but to which, given the opportunity, we would rise. What unattractive woman but sees in the mirror somewhere in her face a hint of beauty? What cringing coward but knows that when the right moment strikes he will seize occasion? We are all endowed with "one grace, one wonder at the least," which saves us from undifferentiating submergence in the sea of the general. To ourselves none of us is mediocre. And hence, those convincingly average people created by the naturalists we view with an almost impersonal kind of sympathy. Those men and women are pathetic, perhaps—but they cannot be ourselves because they lack our dimensions, our potentialities. As for the sub-average creations of Mr. Steinbeck and Mr. Erskine Caldwell, there is, of course, no possibility of our identification with them, and they loom most real when they figure comically, as they do, for instance, in *Tobacco Road*.

Another reason why we cannot identify ourselves with the hero of the naturalists proceeds from aesthetic considerations. As we have observed, a completed creation, just because it has its own entity, takes on a life of its own, always something in excess of its author's intentions. The distinction between realism and naturalism is that the realist *selects* his materials from everyday reality while the naturalist, traditionally concerned with the representation of average people, studiously presents quasi-scientifically the sense of

all the facts of everyday reality. Thus the naturalist achieves his reality by surrounding his characters with a thousand little details of everyday experience. We see from which side of the bed our hero rises, so to speak, observe the tone of the water after he has made his ablutions, note the brand of toothpaste he uses, and so on—these facts being important for our comprehension of his life. This is that spirit of scientific documentation which Zola called for and which his followers have strictly adhered to. Yet, strangely enough, our familiarity with the persons of these stories, as the work makes its leisurely way to its conclusion, grows more and more remote, and the figures become less and less realizable. Only the details take on vividness, not the people connected with them. That is why the *Iliad* is a greater book than *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, despite its paraphernalia of gods, goddesses, and antique warfare. Priam pleading for his son's remains voices the grief of all stricken men in time of loss, and Hector taking leave of his wife speaks with the tongue of all men saying farewell. In Mr. Hemingway's novel there is no single occurrence of such moving universality; the events of his story belong to our day, his gods are our gods, and his warfare our warfare, but from his characters we stand, however well-wishing, aloof; they end by being little more than names to us.

It is the persons with whom we identify ourselves; we can identify ourselves with any happenings only if we can identify ourselves with the person to whom they occur. It matters not whether there are ghosts or witches in the world; what does matter is how Hamlet and Macbeth behave (that is, how *we* behave) in encountering them. It is beside the point to ask whether any girl is likely to procure the perfect husband by his correct choice among three caskets; what is to the point is that Shakespeare makes that experience entirely real because Portia and Bassanio are real. Now, the reader of the naturalistic novel, while the details are accumulating *en masse*, is by degrees being further and further cut off from self-identification. *An American Tragedy* is utterly successful in depicting a thoroughly average young man, raised in an average environment in a particular part of the West, going to work in a particular Midwestern city and having characteristic experiences of average boys in such an employment, getting into the difficulties in which average boys entangle themselves, escaping to an average community in a particular part of New

York State, and there falling into a pattern leading to disaster. I accept the picture * but it means little to me personally because the accent has been placed upon his environment, and I have lived in totally different environments. None of the experiences of Clyde's youth and adolescence were mine; I knew no such parents, no such teachers, had no fellow bellhops, never associated with factory girls, never nursed as a glamorous ideal canoeing on the lake with small-town "aristocracy" or playing bridge with them. That is, I do not associate myself with the man of whom I must remember that he gets up on the left side of the bed and uses toothpaste X, when I myself get up on the right side of the bed and use toothpowder Y. The very precision of the details excludes me.

Now, realism as practised by Jane Austen, Balzac, Tolstoi, Flaubert, Dickens (at his best), Thackeray, Meredith, Hardy, Henry James, Miss Cather, and Mr. Faulkner (among others) avoids this dehumanizing process. The very act of selection, though the material is taken from everyday experience, by omitting these particularizing details tends to elevate the characters above the realm of the average, makes them lifelike but larger than life—as they ought to be—places them with the universal rather than the commonplace; and, as Aristotle observes, it is the business of the literary creator to "express the universal." Without respect to tragedy, it will be seen that the characters created by Ibsen and Chekhov, both realists, are not

* But I reject its indictment of American justice. Dreiser is outraged that, though Clyde did not murder Roberta but only (wanting her dead) *allowed* her to drown when he could have saved her, his hero should have capital punishment visited upon him. A monumental second volume is devoted to retracing the events of the story as a powerful arraignment of the law. But it makes little difference that Clyde is technically innocent; he surely is as morally culpable of a death he could easily have prevented as if his hand had pushed Roberta under the waters. His excuse, the excuse of mediocrity, that he just did not save her but certainly did not actually kill her, alienates us from sympathy, and we cannot share Dreiser's indignation at the miscarriage of justice. The real failure of this novel is demonstrated by the fact that Roberta, in despite of the author, manages to be something of a tragic figure because of the quality of her love for Clyde. Her rising to tragedy disqualifies him as a tragic figure. If we identify with her, we must take sides against him.

deluged by minuteness of detail; their figures are universal. Emma Bovary emerges not as a commonplace woman but as a woman whose tragic failing is common to all women; Flaubert's severe selectivity in recording her life has made her universal; as a result we recognize in Emma's disaster that any woman who allows the characteristically feminine dissatisfaction with the attainable to have free rein will plunge herself and all connected with her into misery. Much the same may be said of Anna Karenina and Miss Cather's Lost Lady, both creations of superb realists. With these women all men and women can identify themselves, for they are not typed but universal. The great persons of literary creation are both entirely themselves and at the same time so deeply rooted in our common humanity that they are we too.

From our vantage point the old quarrel between romanticism and realism has no meaning. "The Poet is not an Historian," says Aristotle. It is the business of the historian to record what has actually happened, the particular event; it is that of the man of letters to deal with what "in a given situation might well happen—a sequence of events that is possible,"¹³ i.e., possible in the sense of being credible. Romanticism and realism are therefore merely matters of preference dictated by the creator's own temperament—which, in truth, may itself so vary that the same author may produce at different times pieces of realism and romanticism, as was the case with Flaubert, Ibsen, Hauptmann, Hamsun, and Strindberg. For the purposes of literature it matters not whether a writer's plot is the fiction of his imagination or the product of his experience and observation of everyday living—provided that he knows men and women as they are—of the past or of the present, set in the country or set in the town. Both romanticism and realism have justified themselves by their creations; by their fruits we know them to merit equal praise. Shakespeare's plays and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* would be enough to make argument superfluous, and readers of judgment turn to both schools with equal enthusiasm. For the reality of the plot has nothing to do with whether its locale be in an impossible Forest of Arden or an actually existing Lyons or London, its time an imagined sixteenth century or an observed twentieth. "A sequence of events which, though actually impossible, looks reasonable should be preferred by the poet to what, though really

possible, seems incredible," says Aristotle.¹⁴ Daily, events occur which would be impossible to make credible in the telling, yet the genius of a Shakespeare can make the advent of Hamlet's father's ghost an experience of fear-inspiring reality. We will accept any story as real, no matter how related or unrelated to our own experience, if it offers the characters the opportunity to behave in universal human fashion, for with that we can always identify ourselves. We all have occasion to encounter ghosts, though they come not from beyond the grave, who appear before us to lay upon us their own stern behests.

And thus the great persons of literature are not only lifelike; they take on more reality than life itself. We come to know Shakespeare's Beatrice, Hamlet, Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Isabella, Cordelia, Kent, and Coriolanus better than we know our own brothers and sisters. For we know these exciting beings completely, could predict how they would behave in a given situation. We can be sure, for instance, that if Beatrice had been Othello's wife no tragedy could have ensued; she would have ridiculed him into rationality with a barrage of well-aimed sarcasms until he spoke his suspicions, which she would have summarily routed with merriment; before she was through with him, he would have been on his knees begging forgiveness. Isabella, on the other hand, would have turned on him in blazing moral indignation and shamed him into sense; Cleopatra would have ensnared him with her enchantingly perverse moods until he drowned his thoughts in passionate embraces. We can be sure, too, that Hamlet in Othello's place would have been quicker to suspect Iago than Desdemona; that Kent, with his blunt loyalty to those he loves, would have pierced through the villain's lies. We know that Desdemona, for all her exquisite delicacy, would have answered Lear not in Cordelia's style, which threw the aging monarch so completely off balance that he lost all perspective, but in the manner she answered Brabantio, which answer, despite the folly of the question, saved her father's face before the assembled court. Benedick would never have looked at Ophelia twice, though Claudio would have adored her; Hamlet, with Portia at his side, would have solved his problems without catastrophe to her or himself. We know these people completely; our brothers and sisters, whom we ought to know better than them, have a way—alas!—of behaving quite

you have a heart

unpredictably. The flesh-and-blood reality of the great creations of the literary masters is, indeed, one of the chief solaces in life for us. So long as we share with them our common humanity, none of us can ever be alone.

None of the world's writers can offer that solace to the extent that Shakespeare does; no other writer exercises our sense of oneness with our fellow human beings in as lively a way as he. It is for this reason that all the scholarly knowledge in the world will not bring the student within sight of Shakespeare if he come unaccompanied by his common humanity. The call upon that common humanity is not, as in Milton, opulently orchestrated with thrilling literary reference; one returns from Milton rewarded in direct proportion to one's previous saturation in the sea of the world's great books. Literary reference plays an almost negligible role (though no knowledge is negligible when reading him) in the apprehension of Shakespeare; in him the appeal is always based upon experiences common to human relationships.* The simplest of Italian barbers who can honestly find *Hamlet* a play *molto simpatico* basks more surely in the warmth of Shakespeare's sun than the most ponderous of scholars who cherishes no passion for literature beyond one for sources, dates, editions, and commas. Naturally, all that kind of knowledge can lead one all the closer to Shakespeare—provided one also brings along his heart. It was the great Bradley himself who, with his vast erudition, could speak with admiration of "that native strength and justice of perception, and that habit of reading with an eager mind, which make many an unscholarly lover of Shakespeare a far better critic than many a Shakespeare scholar."¹⁵ †

* It is here that the professional scholars are always erring. Their enthusiasms over the "findings" of their researches impel them constantly to blind themselves to meanings in Shakespeare which are obvious enough in the light of ordinary human relationships, in favor of bloodless interpretations which bring the poet closer to his contemporaries and sources but further away from what is eternally true in human nature.

† These words, prefatory to one of the few monumental volumes of Shakespearean commentary, never palatable to a certain type of "scholar," are probably with relief thrown with the book into the discard by such as pronounce Bradley's brilliant volume "superseded" by later "findings." He is far too perceptive ever to be superseded; and

Having cleared some ground, as we now approach Shakespeare's work we must make it plain that we are not interested in appraising either him or *Hamlet*. A man must be a fool to stand in front of Pike's Peak and say, "I like you," or stick out his tongue and say, "I don't like you." Pike's Peak will be there long after this little man is forgotten, and so will Shakespeare and his *Hamlet*. We can choose only either to be blind or to see. And it is not the people who love the arts most who are forever appraising them; rather they are too busy experiencing the arts to have much patience with talk about them. They are too busy listening to Beethoven to participate in the recurrent epistolary warfare in the *Times* arguing the greater merits of the *Third*, *Fifth*, *Seventh*, or *Ninth Symphony*; they probably feel as they listen to each that it is the greatest, or rather that each symphony, having a complete and perfect life of its own, is as great as it need be. (And they probably feel, too, that nothing disqualifies the *Sixth* or the *Eighth* either.) This weighing of comparative greatness among things superlatively great is the most absurd of follies. Criticism and discussion are defensible only to the extent that they can enrich the experience of the work of art. Such alone is the apologia for whatever bypaths of criticism we feel obliged to trace in this work.

There remains before we come to *Hamlet*, now that we understand the nature of tragedy, to consider briefly what may be said of Shakespeare's practice in writing tragedy.

Though there is little likelihood that Shakespeare could have known Aristotle's *Poetics*, we find him in all the principles we have drawn therefrom thoroughly Aristotelian. When we consider how utterly different were the history, technique, and theatrical requirements of the Athenian drama, we are all the more struck with the timeless truth of Aristotle's deductions, so that in these fundamentals Shakespeare's tragedies illustrate them as completely as do Sopho-

when he is wrong he never loses one's respect. His delicate appreciation of Shakespeare's tragic power and his own scope will both survive centuries of new scholarly discoveries about dates, editions, and sources. We find ourselves in total disagreement with his view of *Hamlet*—though nothing better has ever been written upon *Lear* than his lectures—and we love him even for his errors, for he writes like a poet himself, and with the vivacity born of love for his subject.

cles'.* If Aristotle could have known Shakespeare's tragedies, he might have gone further than Ben Jonson, and said to him:

I will not lodge thee by
Euripides, bid Aeschylus to lie
A little farther off, to make thee room:
Thou art a monument without a tomb.¹⁷

But can we single out any tendency, can we phrase any philosophy implied in Shakespeare's tragedies when they are considered as a whole, as surely as we can for great world dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Molière, Ibsen, and Chekhov?

Two qualities are obviously to be found in his plays—comedies, histories, and tragedies alike—and these are: an infinite compassion for human beings and an incomparable understanding of the operations of the human soul. He has made us comprehend the involved processes which motivate so bloodchilling a scoundrel as Iago † no

* From this generalization we exclude Shakespeare's very early and inept *Titus Andronicus*. Some scholars deny his authorship of a work so repellent in plot as this. But the master's hand is to be discerned (though unsteady) in its often by-no-means contemptible verse. (Shakespeare's verse, like Shakespeare's understanding, was far less Elizabethan than Shakespearean.) There should be nothing shocking that the world's greatest poet-dramatist should have written one of the world's worst plays before he was mature enough to write so many of the world's best. Most of Milton's earliest verse is dismal, as he himself was well aware when, at twenty-four, he deplored his lack of "inward ripeness."¹⁶ Yet *Paradise Lost* is nonpareil in narrative poetry. These instances, which could be multiplied (e.g., Shelley, Whitman, Beethoven, Wagner), are a proof of how much self-discipline and growth are involved in the highest expressions of genius.

† Among his villains there are only two whose wickedness is not explained—Goneril and Regan, more like harpies than normal flesh and blood. It is of no avail to say of them flippantly that they are incomprehensible because they are women. Shakespeare knew what he was creating, and he needed these two horrors to complete his gallery of portraits. Anyone who has lived with any thought in the twentieth century must acknowledge that here and there we meet with a creature, like a Hitler or a Stalin and the demons who clustered about them in mutual sympathy, whom no psychological theory can explain, incarnations of

less than the almost saintly forbearance of a Helena. Dostoevski has often been mentioned as more nearly Shakespeare's peer than any other writer in this compassion and this comprehension, and surely the great Russian has few equals in these respects. But an important difference exists between the two. Dostoevski's compassion, vast as it is, has a moral unbalance at its root: he is so anxious to understand evil that before he is through with it he has banished it as a kind of human delusion; he washes it away in tears—is, in short, at basis a sentimentalist. Shakespeare, even when weakest, in his early plays, is not once guilty of sentimentality; no writer is more completely free of that taint. (It would never have occurred to him, for example, to select a prostitute as the saintliest of his women.) Ever careful to account for evil, in so far as it can be accounted for, and eager to understand it, he never confuses good and evil. Evil is never depicted by him as only good intentions gone astray. We may have every understanding of the wickedness of Iago or Edmund, may even a little pity them, but we have never any doubt that they are a menace nor do we cease wishing to see their wickedness thwarted. The sanity of distinguishing both between what is good and what is evil, and between the cause of evil and the evil itself, is fundamental in Shakespeare's view of the world. And it is fundamental to a healthy functioning of the body politic; without it all must be chaos.* We must learn to understand what we can of the causes of evil; we must exercise ourselves to help abolish these causes, in so far as they can be abolished, but the evil itself must be punished if

evil as they seem to be. To the indignant devotee of professional psychology one merely observes that whatever could be said about the factors which "condition" a Hitler could be said about countless others who in no way resembled him: men born the same year, in the same kind of house and street in the same city, to parents of comparable temperaments and income, brought up during the same crucial years, subject to the same disillusionments and deprivations. Many of these others became not Hitlers but his victims.

* The anthropologists have copiously demonstrated to us that what is an evil in one culture may be a good in another. But they have also thereby proved—a conclusion some of them evade—that every society has a good and an evil, that ethical distinctions are *sine qua non* to the existence of the race.

we are to survive. We may understand that the gangster-killer may be somewhat a product of the slums (choosing thus to overlook the bright ornaments of society who grew up in the same districts), but we do not therefore hand him a machine-gun and say, "Go ahead, my boy, we understand your impulse to murder!" We must be busy clearing slums but we must also safely remove the killer.

This unmatched compassion and this limitless understanding are not peculiar, however, to the tragedies. What then do we find in the tragedies? Those plays are corrupted by the schools into little moral sermons. *Macbeth*, a favorite victim, is everywhere perverted into a lecture on the dangers of ambition. Ambition is, of course, not necessarily wicked. It is evil only when it spurs men, as it does spur Macbeth, to work evil; but it also provokes some men to noble acts from which thousands reap benefits. Macbeth's *hamartia*, although universally so described, could not then be ambition; no one could take exception if his ambition led him to hope for elevation by the exercise of his military talents, in the fashion which saw his appointment to Cawdor. His tragic flaw is an overweeningness, a recklessness of consequences and the prices he must pay for his acts, even though he knows what these will be like—a heedlessness which moves him to give free rein to his ambition through murderous acts, through means he should firmly reject. Shakespeare's profound wisdom disinclined him from propounding such abstract saws as that "honesty is the best policy," or "ambition is wicked." Honesty, generally, is good. But if a doctor announced to a woman that her husband had six months to live, knowing that his words would kill her, the goodness of his honesty would be open to question. Shakespeare, quite to the contrary, everywhere demonstrates that he feels with his Friar Lawrence:

For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give,
Nor aught so good, but, strained from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse:
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometime's by action dignified.¹⁸

No one better knew than Shakespeare the bottomless truth of the dictum, "By their fruits ye shall know them," He does not imply

that love, for instance, is either good or bad. It is good in so far as it transforms Romeo and Juliet overnight from a callow youth and an insipid girl into two adults of passion and glowing imagination; but it is bad in so far as it makes them reckless. One might as well *accuse* them of love as Macbeth of ambition. Love is good in that it causes Cleopatra and Antony to rise majestically above their egotisms and opportunisms; but it is bad in that it makes them heedless of the road they travel together. One cannot make any moral generalizations about love, honesty, patriotism, and so on—only about the particular acts which they motivate.

Nor can we pretend that Shakespeare's tragedies exhibit the triumph of the virtuous. He knew that there is no neat distribution of rewards and punishment in this world, as was the case with Archibald the All-Right's Gentle Jane, who "was good as gold,"

And when she grew up she was given in marriage
To a first-class earl who keeps his carriage!

and his Teasing Tom who "was a very bad boy,"

The consequence was he was lost totally,
And married a girl in the *corps de bally!* ¹⁹

Shakespeare knew that such is but wishful thinking about life. Rather do we witness, as we must in life, the prolonged success of the Iagos, Edmunds, Gonerils and Regans, Siciniuses and Junius Brutuses; and, what is more anguishing, the heartbreaking sufferings of the Hamlets, Othellos, Lears, and Cordelias. Indeed, Shakespeare's tragic figures suffer all out of proportion to their faults, as they would in life. For merely possessing a bad temper and stubbornness did ever man suffer more than Lear?

The neoclassical period of English literature, committed by its narrow interpretation of ethical values to the doctrine of "poetic justice," was mightily disturbed by Shakespeare's failure to reward the good. It approved, rather, the morality of Richardson in *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, in which Lord B., after vainly chasing Pamela over six volumes in an attempt to seduce her, in the end rewards her endurance by marrying her. The neoclassicists were, therefore, pleased when Tate revised *King Lear* to restore Lear to his throne at the conclusion and marry Cordelia, spared death, to the deserving

Kent. This travesty of Shakespeare's tragedy won the approval even of Samuel Johnson; and this was the version the public saw on the boards for something like a century and a quarter. But Shakespeare would have no traffic with these facile dispensations of justice. He had deliberately, in writing *Lear*, altered the original ending, which found the king once more in possession of his kingdom, to make it a true tragedy. He knew that we are never granted in life a gold star for every act of good conduct or sacrifice, nor are the wicked always rapidly checked in their careers. Sometimes in his tragedies a man of noble deeds (Brutus, Hamlet, Othello), sometimes a man of wicked deeds (Macbeth) goes down to ruin.

But, nevertheless, there is a meaning in the conclusions of his tragedies. If the man fighting on the side of goodness does go down to ruin at the catastrophe of a tragedy, so do those who act in behalf of wickedness. Hamlet is dead, but so are Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Laertes. Othello and Desdemona die, but Iago is to suffer death by torture. Lear and Cordelia perish, but so do Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, and Edmund. And when the smoke clears after the general disaster, who remain in command of the ruined field to build life anew? Almost always exclusively the forces for goodness.* Hamlet is dead, but the well-balanced Horatio and the courageous Fortinbras carry on; Othello dies but a wiser Cassio continues; Lear is dead but Kent and a sager Albany and Edgar survive; in *Macbeth* the forces for right are plainly triumphant; in *Romeo and Juliet* the rival families outdo each other in offering peace and atonement at the end. The world is thus left in the capable hands of the good, and all that has been evil has perished in the fall of the hero.

In other words, Shakespeare seems to be saying that although the good man may go down to defeat, goodness itself cannot. This is the peculiarly Shakespearean version of *katharsis*. Shakespeare's tragic endings remind us that overweeningness may hurl the noblest to the dust, but he bids us also not despair about the world, only to look into ourselves. For goodness, he knows, in the long run,

* The exceptions are the "Roman" plays, where Shakespeare, limited by well-known history, seems to have chosen a tragic ending consonant with the type history-play.

though the struggle be protracted and arduous and may seem momentarily to fall to the evil, cannot be extinguished. He seems to imply what Milton later expressly states:

Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt,
 Surprised by unjust force, but not enthralled,
 Yea even that which mischief meant most harm,
 Shall in the happy trial prove most glory.
 But evil on itself shall back recoil,
 And mix no more with goodness, when at last
 Gathered like scum, and settled to itself
 It shall be in eternal restless change
 Self-fed and self-consumed: if this fail
 The pillared firmament is rottenness,
 And earth's base built on stubble.²⁰

Evil, as so many poets have insisted, can in the event only prove temporary, for it carries the seeds of its own dissolution within itself.

What then? If life has meaning, Shakespeare seems to say, it is in the living of life itself, in participating, as we must, in the struggle

Where evil wars in that design immense
 With good, the gear of God's beneficence.

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4. *Samson Agonistes*, 1755—end.
5. L. Cooper, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (Ithaca, 1947), p. 40.
6. Butcher, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
11. *Othello*, I, iii, 296

12. *King Lear*, IV, vi, 208-9.
13. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
15. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1929), p. 2.
16. "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," 7.
17. Ben Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved Master William Shakespeare," 19-22:

*I will not lodge thee by
Chaucer, or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie
A little farther off, to make thee room:
Thou art a monument without a tomb.*

18. *Romeo and Juliet*, II, iii, 17-22.
19. W. S. Gilbert, *Patience*, II.
20. *Comus*, 588-598.

HE THOUGHT HE SAW A BANKER'S CLERK
DESCENDING FROM THE 'BUS;
HE LOOKED AGAIN, AND FOUND IT WAS
A HIPPOPOTAMUS.

"IF THIS SHOULD STAY TO DINE," HE SAID,
"THERE WON'T BE MUCH FOR US!"

HE THOUGHT HE SAW AN ALBATROSS
THAT FLUTTERED ROUND THE LAMP;
HE LOOKED AGAIN, AND FOUND IT WAS
A PENNY POSTAGE-STAMP.

"YOU'D BEST BE GETTING HOME," HE SAID,
"THE NIGHTS ARE VERY DAMP!"

Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno*

III *Confusion Worse Confounded: "Hamlet" and the Critics*

WHATEVER DIFFICULTIES *Hamlet* now presents emanate largely, though not entirely, from the confusion attending the interpretation of its hero's character and objectives. No other play of Shakespeare's revolves so completely about the central character as does this. To see Hamlet otherwise than as Shakespeare intended him to be is to mistake the meaning of the entire play. It is a great misfortune that the commentators, with the best will in the world, have fairly succeeded in obfuscating the dramatist's intentions. To make one's way through the conflict of their opinions is to understand (*durch Mitleid*) perfectly Lucifer's hazardous voyage through Chaos:

a dark

Illimitable ocean without bound,
 Without dimension, where length, breadth, and height,
 And time and place are lost; . . .
 amidst the noise
 Of endless wars . . .
 For hot, cold, moist, and dry, four champions fierce
 Strive here for mastery, and to battle bring
 Their embryon atoms; they around the flag
 Of each his faction in their several clans,
 Light-armed or heavy, sharp, smooth, swift or slow,
 Swarm populous, unnumbered as the sands. . . .
 . . . To whom these most adhere
 He rules a moment; chaos umpire sits. . . .¹

The reader may, then, wish to spare himself the kind of experience which could bedevil the Devil himself. He who must run as he readeth may choose to skip this section: in this we allow the critics and scholars to speak for themselves, and in the following section we answer them with chapter and verse. Yet it would be a pity to miss the sport. And, unless the reader possesses absolutely no ideas about Hamlet, he is bound to scent the whiff of his own somewhere in the millefiori nosegay here culled.

It will be cold comfort to the cultivated general reader to know the state of current scholarship, but to give him his bearings he ought in all fairness to be apprized of it. It is true enough that there is an atmosphere of emotional stability (often deceptive) about the writings of twentieth-century literary scholars which makes earlier commentary seem in comparison rather flighty. A kind of Germanic doggedness to be concerned only with the facts, and to employ them logically, characterizes the newer commentaries and provides an air of sobriety particularly welcome after some of the romantic nonsense vented in the nineteenth century. Modern criticism, one is expected to feel, though certainly duller, is safer. There has been, indeed, an enormous amount of investigation in our time into literary sources, dates, editions, and historical analogy. All of this should be to the good, and could be, if this enthusiastic digging away at the mound of facts did not result in a situation as unsatisfactory as the

"unscientific" procedures of earlier commentary. Facts are helpful and cannot be ignored, but they are also capable of wild over-interpretation. For example, because it has been proved that in Elizabethan literature a man in love is occasionally shown as being slovenly in dress, innumerable scholars take that discovery as proof that Shakespeare causes Hamlet to appear before Ophelia with his "stockings fouled, ungartered," and wrinkled simply to indicate, by use of a theatrical convention, that Hamlet is in love with her. Now, if the matter of the play pointed to such an interpretation of the incident (as it does not), this convention would certainly reinforce the scene. But the unfortunate habit of our scholars is to use such an isolated scholarly discovery to prove their contentions about the play as a whole. It will not do to conclude that because a few of Shakespeare's contemporaries used such a convention to convey a meaning, Shakespeare necessarily used it for the same meaning, particularly when we must thereby exclude a sounder, simpler, more human interpretation of Hamlet's clothes being disordered. Twentieth-century scholarly conviction that Shakespeare could never have meant more than his contemporaries, reduces him from the stature that every unscholarly admirer knows him to possess.

Nineteenth-century commentary was, in short, too much the victim of imagination working without regard to the facts; twentieth-century commentary is too much in love with isolated facts and too much the victim of an almost total lack of literary imagination. There is something absurd about the contempt of academic scholars, which is as great as a woman's for last year's fashion in dresses, for any speculations older than a couple of decades. The pseudo-scientific search for newer facts about sources, dates, editions, and historical analogies thus would rate only the newest crop unearthed as possessing value. Professional scholars seem often more interested in answering one another than in writing their learned articles to enrich anyone else's experience of literature.* It is a state

* We still recall the words of one of our professors, a man of renown in his field, during the ancient days of our graduate study: "I cannot understand the complaint of so many young scholars that they cannot find new subjects to write about; they seem to feel that everything's been done. All I have to do is pick up any issue of a learned

of mind that unhappily cooperates with prevailing conditions in the academic world. College professors of English are expected intermittently to turn out "learned articles" in order to maintain their jobs or advance their salaries. The result is that they seem mutually to have agreed to operate in a hermetically sealed chamber from which the general public is excluded—too often the poets they write about are excluded too. Such scholars contrive to rule over a private empire to which only the "specialist" is admitted, and to which the well-read lover of literature is not anxious for a passport. Indeed, this lover of literature, if he has a creative imagination, need not even apply—for in that closed realm nothing is more suspect than creativeness. There it is common to sneer at the critical vision of a Coleridge, Hazlitt, Arnold, or Pater, and at the generous enthusiasms of a Shelley or Swinburne—on the grounds that these men were only creators, not scholars. It is true that the facts at our disposal were not at theirs, and that therefore these men did make (inevitably) certain errors; but it is also true that, with all his "mistakes," Coleridge remains to date about many matters the keenest critic Shakespeare ever had—and even his mistakes are interesting and part of literature itself. There is nothing odd in that a great poet should have deeper insight into another great poet than a scholar writing either for reasons of bread and butter or to chase the bubble of scholarly reputation.* As for the rapturous endorsements of a Swinburne, whose taste was ever vitiated by them? At worst they are touchingly amusing; at best their magnanimous passion for literature is healthily contagious. There is surely less harm in overpraise of a good thing than myopic unawareness of its merit. Too much modern scholarship has

periodical like the *P.M.L.A.* or *Englische Studien*, and I always find so much to disagree with, that I'm all set to write a half-dozen articles myself." Even Professor J. Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet* owes its genesis, by the author's own admission, to this frame of mind. In his dedication he tells of reading by chance an article on the play by W. W. Greg in *The Modern Language Review* and of how, after re-reading it, he realized that he "had been born to answer it."²

* With the exception of Aristotle and Longinus the roster of the world's great critics is the roll of some of the greatest creators of literature: e.g., Plato, Horace, Dante, Ben Jonson, Dryden, Addison, Johnson, Lessing, Goethe, Coleridge, De Quincey, Arnold, Pater.

degenerated into the picking of fleas by scholars from one another, or even looking for them where they are not. It is all a vast dedication to the wrong ends, for facts can be of invaluable use to true literary criticism. But they are utterly useless without literary imagination or when they are employed without reference to the basic truth that literature must ever be a representation of the life that is lived by men and women.* There are, happily, scholars who do not forget this.

The situation understood, we are ready to plunge into the thick of the fight over *Hamlet*. First, however, a few admonitions are in order:

¶ Some of the opinions quoted are entirely fallacious; some are partially true; some stand on the threshold of truth but do not enter. Let no one, in desperation, seize upon any single view because it seems as good as any other. For that will bring no satisfaction to the earnest seeker after Shakespeare's meaning. None of these opinions will exactly fit *Hamlet*, and we can be content with nothing less than perfect conformance of the theory we accept to the play Shakespeare wrote.

¶ We can do no more than give examples of typical interpretations. For each we quote, rest assured there exist others varying but slightly from it.

¶ We present what we believe to be all the leading interpretations in one chapter for the very reason that we are not primarily interested in answering any one of them. We should like to avoid the picking of fleas from our colleagues' theories; we wish to understand the play for what it says in itself. Too many critics have fallen into the error of beginning with the Prince himself and *then* going to the play of which he is a part. If we present opinions which we hope will provide some amusement, it is largely to get them out of the way, though we shall be glad to acknowledge with gratitude our indebtedness for an idea or two we pick up in the process.

* A well-known scholar, commenting on a brilliant historical novel, said in admiration, "An enormous amount of research must have gone into this work. But what courage it must have taken to put it all together to make a novel!" Lucky for scholars that authors do not lack this courage. Otherwise on what could scholarship feed?

¶ We undertake to make all plain in due course. There is nothing bewildering in *Hamlet*, once we clear the road to it.

It should be remembered, to begin with, that there was not always a "*Hamlet* problem." The vogue of finding one did not commence until the eighteenth century, when the drama was nearly a century and a half old. *Hamlet* was plainly a great favorite very early in its career, as the number of its known printings testifies—testimony which is amplified by the recorded admiration³ of several contemporaries of Shakespeare. An able study of older *Hamlet* criticism clearly proves that the play was widely known throughout the seventeenth century⁴ (at the opening of which it was written), but nowhere implies that during that popularity there was any doubt as to the meaning of the play. The Earl of Shaftesbury, no Shakespeare idolator, could say complacently early in the eighteenth century that of all its author's plays *Hamlet* "appears to have most affected English hearts, and has perhaps been oftenest acted of any which have come upon our stage," and that its plot is one "naturally fitted to move horror (i.e., fear) and compassion."⁵ This guess of Shaftesbury's has been made good by Mr. Hogan, who shows statistically that 358 performances of the play were given in London between 1703 and 1750—the largest number for any Shakespearean play.⁶

It is, of course, possible that actors and directors, impelled by their willingness to sacrifice a play for the greater exhibition of personal talents, may have been to some extent responsible for inaugurating the difficulties—we see them doing as much in our own time. But there certainly has been one force at work in the distortion of *Hamlet's* meaning. No student of the scholarship on the play can fail observing how much each age and intellectual climate have perverted this masterwork to suit the prejudices of the epoch. Shaftesbury praises *Hamlet* for conforming to standards Shakespeare never dreamt of considering. Johnson raps its author over the knuckles for failing to meet much the same standards. Goethe makes its hero another Werther, Coleridge an early-nineteenth-century Romantic, the Germans make him very German, and the Freudians into a perfect candidate for the clinical couch.

Unfortunately, the English theater could not maintain a direct

tradition from Shakespeare to us that in any way resembles the manner in which the *Comédie Française* at Paris has inherited the acting traditions directly from the days of Corneille, Molière, and Racine.* In England the growth of Puritanism in the generation following Shakespeare's death resulted in the gradual withdrawal of the public's support from the theater. Even when they were a small minority, the Puritans of Elizabeth's day were untiring in their attacks on the stage and their efforts to have the giving of plays prohibited. At length, with the majority of the populace now in their ranks, they were strong enough to close the last of the Elizabethan playhouses by Parliamentary edict in 1642. The evidence is that this last surviving theater would soon have had to shut its doors in any case, for there was too small an audience left to keep them open. During the Cromwellian Commonwealth few plays were given anywhere in England for the public. And when, in the next generation, drama was revived with the opening of first one, then a second theater (only one of which ever managed to thrive at the same time) in London, for the entertainment of the limited circle of the Court—the

* When the actors of Molière's theater and those of the rival *Hôtel de Bourgogne* combined, the *Comédie Française* was born, its first patents being issued in 1685. Thus it came into direct succession of the acting traditions of the two theaters with which Corneille, Molière, and Racine had been intimately connected⁷—Molière himself, of course, being the presiding genius and leading actor of his troupe. The result is that the audience at the *Comédie* today probably see their classics performed as the authors intended them to be, because of the unbroken continuity of the companies. Strangers, indeed, have been known to remark that there is something almost Chinese in the conventionalized gestures and attitudes, tempi, and movements of the French classics as seen at that theater, and marvel at how identically actors seem to interpret the same role. They do not quite understand that so far as the spectators' interest in the actors is concerned, it centers not at all on possible new interpretations, which would only shock the audience, but on proficiency in acting technique—to find a new delicacy or power in a well-known gesture, look of the eye, or lift of the voice. There devotees sit on the edge of their seats, hands poised for applause, in anticipation of certain moments of which they know not only the speeches but the stage direction by heart, and the precision in the rendering of which they are prepared to appraise.

body of the public still absenting itself—the line of Elizabethan acting traditions was lost.

In an age so spectacularly different in tastes, interests, morals, morale, and philosophy as the Restoration, those traditions, had they been available, would probably have carried little weight with either actors or courtly audience. The court of Charles II or James II had little or no respect for the most characteristic among Shakespeare's many gifted contemporaries, and were glad enough to think those "barbarians" might die of neglect. For Shakespeare alone did they make exception; but only a man of Dryden's stature preferred not to speak of him condescendingly. Pepys, immortal for his mediocrity, is a sure barometer for the average taste of the time. He thinks *Romeo and Juliet* the "worst [play] that ever I heard in my life," and after a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes an oath that "I . . . shall never see [it] again, for it is the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life"; a monstrous travesty of what pretended to be *Macbeth*, however, charms him by the "variety of dancing and music." The Restoration was too busy aping the French in dress and the grand manner, too anxious to cultivate the *salon* version of the classical, to feel comfortable in Shakespeare's open spaces.

It is true that one playwright-manager bridged the period from the closing of the theaters in 1642 to the opening of the Restoration playhouses less than two decades later, Sir William D'Avenant. It is also true that D'Avenant was pleased to float the rumor that he was Shakespeare's illegitimate son, in an era when no one seemed to mind branding his mother a harlot to get himself a little extra distinction in the world. Born the son of decent tavern-keepers (the name then was Davenant) whose hostel Shakespeare sometimes visited, he may even have been named for the dramatist—although the name of William is not sufficiently exotic among Englishmen for us to jump to that conclusion. At any rate, D'Avenant was five when Shakespeare retired from the stage, and ten when he died—an age too tender even for a genius (which D'Avenant emphatically was not) to acquire from the master any profound knowledge of Shakespeare's conceptions of his works, even had the latter felt inclined to bestow it on a six-year-old darling of a pigmy size. Moreover, during the Restoration D'Avenant became very much the man of the new age,

as his mangling of *Measure for Measure*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest* (the last with Dryden's cooperation) abundantly proves. Gosse calls him the "debaser" of the stage and deems his influence "wholly deplorable."⁸ It was under his influence that Betterton and his fellow actors of the Restoration took over the French style and that the theater began to be buried under elaborate scenery.* D'Avenant is assuredly too slender a thread on which

* Yet, because of his reputed relationship to Shakespeare and the fact that he knew the theater before the Puritan prohibition, it is generally assumed that he passed on Elizabethan tradition to the new age. The Restoration Court, on the other hand, everyone agrees, was notably unreceptive to the Elizabethan style. Without setting out to do so, Mr. Hazelton Spencer, in his thoroughly documented study of Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Improved*, makes out a perfect case against the notion of D'Avenant as a sort of belated Elizabethan.⁹ Consider just a handful of D'Avenant's literary crimes (all of them stimulated by a desire to accommodate the new taste): He took Beatrice and Benedick out of *Much Ado* and put them into his perversion of *Measure for Measure*, making Benedick Angelo's brother;¹⁰ in the same work he did not hesitate to change Claudio's superb lines,

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot,
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice,
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world, or to be worse than worst
Of those, that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling—'tis too horrible . . .

to

Oh Sister, 'tis to go we know not whither.
We lie in silent darkness, and we rot;
Where long our motion is not stopt; for though
In graves none walk upright (proudly to face
The stars) yet there we move again, when our
Corruption makes those worms in whom we crawl.
Perhaps the spirit (which is future life)

to hang the continuance of Shakespearean tradition. All the evidence is to the contrary.

It is quite possible that, unlike their compeers of the French classic stage, English-speaking actors have always felt, as Miss Webster does, that it is more important for actors and directors to exploit their own personalities than to interpret the dramatist's creation. Perhaps our difficulties with Shakespeare really owe their ori-

Dwells salamander-like, unharmed in fire:
Or else with wandering winds is blown about
The world. But if condemned like those
Whom our incertain thought imagines howling. . . . ;¹¹

in his version of *Macbeth* he did not scruple to introduce songs like this:

Black spirits and white,
Red spirits and gray;
Mingle, mingle, mingle,
You that mingle may.
Tiffin, tiffin, keep it stiff in,
Fire drake Puckey, make it lucky:
Liar Robin, you must bob in. . . . ;¹²

and he was responsible (Mr. Spencer proves) for the dreadful 1676 publication of *Hamlet*, a version "ruthlessly cut."¹³ Among the omissions are Polonius' advice to his son, his scene with Reynaldo, Hamlet's encounter with Fortinbras' army, Hamlet's first soliloquy, his soliloquy after the Player's speech, and his speeches to his mother in her closet after the Ghost's disappearance.¹⁴ Among the mutilated lines in this *Hamlet* a few samples will indicate the conscienceless hand of the adapter:

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought

becomes

Shews sick and pale with thought;

and

In hugger-mugger

becomes

Obscurely to inter him.¹⁵

Was this the man who could be interested in passing on to Betterton Shakespeare's own *Hamlet*?

gins to what theatrical folk have done with his texts. Of one thing we can be sure: by the time we come to the great Garrick, *Hamlet* was well on its way to becoming something quite different from what its author had envisioned. Johnson says, to us amazingly, that "the pretended madness of Hamlet causes much mirth"—a point of view which few modern audiences would share, but which seems to justify Mr. Mathew's conclusion that *Hamlet* in the mid-eighteenth century was performed "not as a Tragedy but as a Tragi-comical Pantomime in the Classical sense."¹⁶

In any event, it was more than a century before anyone recorded any difficulties in understanding this ever-popular play. Once the difficulties were raised, however, the winds of criticism began to augment in rage until they stirred up tempests and hurricanes to vie with those in the third act of *Lear*. To make an orderly presentation of this hurly-burly is not easy. But it is possible to state that the storms have raged over two questions above all others: 1. Is Hamlet's conduct that of a sane man? 2. Why does he delay killing the King? We shall consider these first.

HAMLET'S SANITY

Not to be Gilbertian, we may nevertheless agree at the outset that four attitudes are the only possibilities on the question of Hamlet's sanity: (1) Hamlet is insane, or (2) Hamlet feigns insanity, or (3) Hamlet feigns insanity at times and is actually insane at others, or (4) Hamlet is perfectly sane and never pretends to be otherwise. All but the last have been stoutly upheld.

"THE MAD PRINCE"

In the seventeen-forties Aaron Hill observed that "besides Hamlet's assumed insanity, there was in him a melancholy, which bordered on madness"¹⁷—melancholy being at the time as fashionable a "disease" as allergies are today. Some years later Dr. Akenside remarked to George Steevens, the Shakespeare editor, that "the conduct of Hamlet was every way unnatural and indefensible, unless he were to be regarded as a young man whose intellects were in some degree impaired by his own misfortunes."¹⁸ These appear to be the earliest expressions advancing the theory of Hamlet's mental

illness. Ever since Dr. Ferriar in 1813 was sure the hero's character "can only be understood" on the principle of latent lunacy,¹⁹ the medicos have been busy with Hamlet,²⁰ eager to prove him insane. It is an inviting theory, for it comfortably explains in anyone's conduct whatever seems otherwise difficult of explanation. In Hamlet's case (and the doctors have made it a case!), it would cozily leave nothing to be accounted for.

Among the doctor-critics we are particularly devoted to two: Dr. Ray and Dr. Bucknill. Dr. Ray sheds light upon the subject in a magazine fitly named *The American Journal of Insanity*; like other colleagues he feels Shakespeare wrote with the authority of a brain specialist and was not "guided solely by intuition. He unquestionably did observe the insane."²¹ So good a medico was Shakespeare that "Hamlet's mental condition furnishes in abundance the characteristic symptoms of insanity in wonderful harmony and consistency. . . ."²² On the supposition of his real insanity we have a satisfactory explanation of the difficulties which have received such various solutions."²³ Dr. Ray's solution recommends itself as a procedure to simplify life: "if anybody's conduct strikes you as inscrutable, dismiss the man from your thoughts by labeling him a lunatic." The worthy doctor is particularly troubled about a scene which has upset many a commentator—Hamlet's "remarkable interview" with Ophelia, a scene which, he says, has "proved a perfect *pons asinorum* [bridge of asses]," though we fear Dr. Ray is ready to join the braying throng. "Some regard his treatment of Ophelia as unnecessarily harsh and unfeeling. . . . If Homer sometimes nods, so may Shakespeare. Others think that Hamlet's love for Ophelia was but lukewarm after all. . . . The most natural * view of the sub-

* "Natural, n. . . . 3. One born without the usual faculty of reasoning or understanding; a fool; an idiot.

This drivelling love is like a great *natural*, that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole.

Romeo and Juliet, II, iv, 95."—*The Century Dictionary*, Vol. V.

Also, as an adjective: "'Truly,' said I, 'the turn is so natural either way you have made me almost giddy with it.'"

Addison's "Ned Softly the Poet" (*Tatler*, 163).

ject—that which is most readily and obviously suggested—relieves us of all these difficulties, and reveals to us the same strong and earnest significance which appears in every other scene of the play. If Hamlet is really insane . . . then his conduct is what might have been naturally expected.”²⁴

But we have a special fondness for Dr. Bucknill. Hamlet, he says, “offers as tests of his sanity that his pulse is temperate, that his attention is under command, and his memory faithful, tests which we are bound to pronounce as fallacious as could be offered. . . . The pulse in mania averages about fifteen beats above that of health; that of the insane generally, including maniacs, only averages nine beats above the healthy standard. . . . That a maniac would gambol from reproducing in the same words any statement he had made is true enough in the acute forms of the disease; but it is not so in numberless instances of chronic mania, nor in melancholia or partial insanity. . . . Indeed, the possessor of the most brilliant memory we ever met with was a violent and mischievous maniac. He would quote page after page from Greek, Latin, and French classics. *The Iliad* and the best plays of Molière in particular, he seemed to have at his fingers’ ends.”²⁵ One reads this and the doubt is raised in the un-medical mind as to whether or not they had confined the right person to the padded cell.

But not all in the profession are so coldly clinical. Dr. Ray, you will have remarked, gave evidence of a romantic side to his character as soon as Ophelia’s name came up. Dr. Conolly, however, is almost a poet: “In his conversation with Ophelia his words and conduct are simply those of a man distempered. . . . There is no reason and no excuse except the sad excuse that he is not in his perfect mind. To suppose him feigning is impossible. No man, however, resolved to act a cruel part, could be supposed to listen to words of trust sincerely spoken by a gentle woman, diffidently addressing him, and returning him the gifts he had in happier hours presented to her with honeyed vows, without casting away all predetermined simulation, and clasping her to his heart.”²⁶ The tender rhetoric reveals the doctor’s noble heart; I wish that my own physician had some of Dr. Conolly’s romantic warmth—his bills might, in consequence, be more tolerable! O, Ophelia, in the desire to be just to thee, how many crimes have been committed in thy name against Lord Ham-

let! Even the bear, Sam Johnson, with asperity said of your lover that he played "the madman most" when he treated you "with so much rudeness, which seems to be useless and wanton cruelty."²⁷

With such good effect, apparently, did the faculty discourse on the symptoms of Hamlet's madness that by 1871 Dr. Stearns could say, "The majority of readers of the present day believe that Hamlet's madness was real."²⁸ This may indeed have been the case, considering that we find the editor Hudson, well-known for his sensitive comments on and squeamish expurgations of Shakespeare, confessing that after twenty years of reflection he is forced to the conclusion: "In plain terms, Hamlet is mad."²⁹

It was probably inevitable that the legal profession, not to be outdone by its ancient rival, should make its pronouncements too. Mr. Watts brings Hamlet before the bar for the murder of Polonius, tries him, and as prosecutor, defender, judge, and jury decides that the Prince must be given by any true Britishers the verdict of "not guilty . . . on the ground of insanity"; Hamlet's sentence is "to be detained during Her Majesty's pleasure."³⁰

Men of letters have by no means been loath to follow in the cry of the doctors. Lloyd believes that the very warning Hamlet "gives of his purposed simulation" of madness "may be but one of the cunningness of the truly insane."³¹ This is a fairly common view.³² Thus, George Henry Lewes: Hamlet "may be really mad, and yet, with that terrible consciousness of the fact which often visits the insane, he may 'put an antic disposition on' as a sort of relief to his feelings."³³ Mr. J. Dover Wilson's idea bears, as we shall see, a certain resemblance to this. Some, including several already cited, ascribe Hamlet's madness not to a latent lunacy but to his being unhinged by his interview with the Ghost.³⁴ *

Such, oddly enough, is the view taken in that work now gen-

* Indeed, young innocents these days are encouraged to take this position, if anything so cloudily expressed can be said to take a position; in her *Children's Shakespeare* Miss Nesbit explains to her juvenile readers: "The shock of seeing and hearing his father's ghost made him feel almost mad, and for fear that his uncle might notice he was not himself, he determined to hide his mad longing for revenge under a pretended madness in other matters."³⁵

("Her style was anything but clear . . ."—*The Three Voices*.³⁶)

erally held the most authoritative on *Hamlet*. Mr. J. Dover Wilson believes too that Hamlet is rendered by his talk with the Ghost unstable,³⁷ though the tendency was earlier manifested, and that later in the play the Prince feigns madness: "This passage of a hundred lines (i.e., after the Ghost's disappearance in the first act) exhibits Hamlet in a state of extreme emotional instability, and with an intellect tottering on its seat. Furthermore the 'antic disposition' has manifested itself on three separate occasions before Hamlet ever refers to it at all. . . . Shakespeare wishes us to feel that Hamlet assumes madness because he cannot help it. The tragic burden has done its work, and he is conscious that he no longer retains perfect control over himself. What more natural than that he should conceal his nervous breakdown behind a mask which would enable him to let himself go when the fit is upon him?"³⁸ In short, the Ghost has left his son in the "pitiable condition" of a complete nervous collapse.³⁹ * The pioneer psychoanalyst, Dr. Jones, feels that Shakespeare depicted "with faultless insight" Hamlet caught in the toils of "psychoneurosis," which implies "a state of mind where the person is unduly, and often painfully, driven or thwarted by the 'unconscious' part of his mind, that buried part that was once the infant's mind and still lives on side by side with the adult mentality that has developed out of it and should have taken its place."⁴⁰ He finds himself much in accord with Mr. J. Dover Wilson.

Mr. W. W. Greg considers Hamlet the victim of hallucinations, the Ghost's narrative being but a "figment" of Hamlet's brain;⁴¹ Mr. Kemp varies this view by branding the Ghost a liar, and arguing that not Claudius but Horatio was the murderer of the late king;⁴² Mr. Leech thinks Hamlet pathologically incapable of revenge⁴³ since he is "at least on the borderline of madness."⁴⁴ Mr. Mathew deems him

* In a discussion of tragedy it is unnecessary for us to make fine medical distinctions between such losses of self-control as madness, nervous breakdown, neurasthenia. The actual differences among these (if medicine *has* decided what they are!) are beside the point. All these and shades thereof amount to the same thing so far as the cardinal literary question is concerned. And that question is simply: "Is the hero responsible for his acts?" A madman, a psychopath, a neurotic, or a victim of a nervous breakdown, all, obviously, are not to be held accountable for what they do, and hence cannot serve as tragic heroes.

half-mad: "He was more mad than he thought he was though more sane than some other people believed"⁴⁵—whatever that means. For Mr. G. Wilson Knight, Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia is once more the proof of madness: "This is no mock-madness. To see it as such is to miss the power of the central theme of the play"; Hamlet walks alone "within the prison of mental death."⁴⁶

Some have pronounced Hamlet the type manic-depressive⁴⁷ or "cyclothymic";⁴⁸ some the neurasthenic⁴⁹—even going so far as to explain the composition of the play as owing to Shakespeare's nervous condition because of his father's death and Essex's execution,⁵⁰ or, like the other tragedies, to the painful events in Shakespeare's life;⁵¹ some find him only temporarily insane;⁵² some insane only with Ophelia.⁵³ One writer thinks him mad only as a result of being "too long at the university"⁵⁴ and thus developing into a kind of perennial sophomore (which would offer grim horizons to college teachers if administrations these days did not eject students who show propensities towards a protracted tenancy). Another is convinced that the proof of Hamlet's lunacy is that he is a perfect logician and tries to use "the essential principles of logic" excessively⁵⁵—which, it seems, only a madman does. (We may have here an explanation, at least, of why madmen continue, happily, to be in a minority. But does it mean that hereafter one ought to be extremely chary of dealings with one's colleagues, the professors of logic?)

The great Bradley stands somewhere outside these opinions, holding, as he does, that the root of Hamlet's character is melancholy, which he thinks "from the psychological point of view . . . is the centre of the tragedy."⁵⁶ But, he warns, "'Melancholy,' I said, not dejection, nor yet insanity. That Hamlet was not far from insanity is very probable. His adoption of the pretence of madness may well have been due in part to fear of the reality."⁵⁷ Bradley, however, with that literary refinement so characteristic of him, also warns: "But the psychological point of view is not equivalent to the tragic."⁵⁸ Unfortunately, he did not sufficiently hearken to his own admonishment, as we shall see.

Many scholars, while rejecting Bradley's detailed account, accept *Hamlet* as a study in melancholia;⁵⁹ to Mr. Knight this disease makes of Hamlet "a dark and dangerous force";⁶⁰ Professor Adams

feels that the play "involves a study of melancholia," though he feels that to be incidental to the main subject: "a study of the *disillusionment of an idealist*." ⁶¹

A man must have considerable cheek, one surmises, to suppose that because of all this manufactured confusion Shakespeare himself could not have answered the question as to whether Hamlet is to be understood as mad or sane. Yet it was no one less than Barrett Wendell who maintained as much.⁶² Even Mr. Granville-Barker is convinced that Shakespeare nowhere makes clear whether Hamlet is mad or not, and that the dramatist deliberately causes his hero to speak of his mental condition equivocally: "The thing itself is a riddle. He attempts no answer. Nor need he"; ⁶³ and Mr. Trench thinks that "even Shakespeare perhaps found it hard to understand him." ⁶⁴ Professor Schücking finds, however, that only near the end of the play does Hamlet provide the answer, when he shows himself practically "*non compos mentis*." ⁶⁵ Were it not patently unjust one might be tempted to ask Mr. Mark Van Doren if he does not also believe Shakespeare uncertain about what he was trying to create. In a series of chapters remarkable for insight on the various plays, Mr. Van Doren on *Hamlet* alone—except for his delightful prose—is disappointing; for he manages in the midst of much clever summary of opinion and brilliant phraseology to avoid taking any point of view at all: "It has been said of Hamlet that something in his genius renders him superior to decision and incapable of act, and it has been pointed out that he dominates the busiest of all known plays. Both views are right. His antic disposition has been analyzed as a symptom of abnormality and as a device for seeming mad. Neither theory is without support. He has been called the best of men and the worst of men. One judgment is as just as another." Mr. Van Doren cites the various theories as to what it is that engages Hamlet's "deepest attention," and decides "Any of them will do." ⁶⁶ Obviously, Shakespeare's Hamlet must have been to the playwright one man, not a monstrous composite of all critical opinion! To go further, with the other gentlemen, and ascribe to the creator vagueness of intention, is to deny the very basis of the creative process. A man creates only because he has something very definite to impart, and it would be odd that of all the world's masterpieces *Hamlet* should be the exception!

We ourselves—need we say?—are convinced that Hamlet is perfectly sane.

HAMLET FEIGNING MADNESS

Of course, almost from the beginning of the discussion, as the arguments to prove Hamlet mad were being advanced, there was no lack of contenders proving Hamlet's insanity to be only feigned. Many, indeed, thought him so plainly feigning madness that there was no need of arguing the point. Samuel Johnson was one of these, and there have been many others down to the dawn of our present century.⁶⁷ As Mackenzie put it, as early as 1780, "The distraction of Hamlet is clearly affected through the whole play, always subject to the control of his reason, and subservient to the accomplishment of his designs."⁶⁸ Although there has been some tendency in recent scholarship, as we have seen (notably in the writings of Messrs. Greg and J. D. Wilson), to revive the idea of Hamlet's mental instability, chiefly through subtle psychiatric analyses, comparatively few commentators in our time feel it urgent to prove that Hamlet feigns insanity. Most scholars now calmly take that view for granted,⁶⁹ though occasionally it has been said that for Hamlet so to conduct himself proves rather "impolitic."⁷⁰

But in many quarters it is assumed that Hamlet's playing the madman is the very root of the plot. Professor Lewis, after an examination of Shakespeare's sources, states this conviction in the most powerful terms: "The pretence of madness was the starting-point from which Hamlet's character was evolved, and it may well have determined the whole course of its development."⁷¹ Professor Stoll inaugurates part of his discussion with: "The lively lunacy that Hamlet now assumes is indispensable to the plot."⁷² And Professor Kittredge says even more explicitly that "Hamlet's motive for acting the madman is obvious. We speak unguardedly in the presence of children and madmen; . . . and so the King or the Queen may say something that will afford the evidence needed (i.e., by Hamlet) to confirm the testimony of the Ghost";⁷³ but, Professor Kittredge adds, this device decided upon by the Prince "on the spur of the moment," does not prove successful, and Hamlet learns nothing he needs because of it. Vaguely allied to this view is the explanation that Hamlet's purpose is to "gain time."⁷⁴ Mr. Hazelton Spencer sees

the hero's "biding his time" through pretended lunacy as simply an old convention of the revenge-play which Shakespeare was glad to employ.⁷⁵

Hamlet's motive for feigning madness has had other ascriptions than Professor Kittredge's. One nineteenth-century critic thought that the "masquerade . . . pleased a misanthropic humor,—it gave him shelter and a sort of escape from society."⁷⁶ James Russell Lowell felt that since "Hamlet *drifts* through the whole tragedy" and "never keeps on one tack long enough to get steerage way . . . the scheme of simulated insanity is precisely the one he would have been likely to hit upon, because it enabled him to follow his own bent, and to drift. . . . It enables him to *play* with life and duty, instead of taking them by the rougher side, where alone any firm grip is possible."⁷⁷ That the feigned insanity serves the important function of easing "the mental suffering" under which Hamlet labors because of his long delay⁷⁸ is Professor Adams' opinion.

Considering the dramatist's possible motives in having Hamlet assume madness, Professor Stoll holds that the device "arouses suspense—we apprehend and dread the Prince's betrayal of his purpose."⁷⁹ On the other hand, it is sometimes held that Shakespeare's intentions were to provide comic effects,⁸⁰ such too having been Samuel Johnson's notion.

There is surely no need for us to multiply instances. The odds are overwhelming that the reader, at this point, at least, conceives Hamlet to be a man who (for one reason or another or for no reason) assumes the guise of lunacy. While we have not always been able to guess precisely which interpretation an actor thought he was conveying to the audience, when the intent has been at all clear every one of the many Hamlets we have seen on the stage has exhibited the hero as pretending insanity. We still remember Mr. John Barrymore flicking off Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a well-calculated wave of the hand, while rolling his eyes maniacally. (This Mr. Olivier could not do in his cinema version since he completely omitted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the plot!) We still can see Mr. Evans, at the approach of the same unfortunate pair, murmuring, "O, here they come!" while he took a lock of his hair, brushed it over his eyes, and took on the look and conduct of a zany.

No, we need not multiply instances for any view so widely

adopted. But we are by no means through with the matter. It is curious that not many commentators have asked themselves just what Hamlet's assumption of the role of madman does accomplish for the plot of this play. Professor Stoll, indeed, remarks in passing that that conduct in the old *Hamlet* story has more reason for being introduced than in the play Shakespeare wrote⁸¹—a point made more emphatically years ago by Büchner.⁸² Mr. Robertson goes further in deeming the feigned lunacy a downright defect in the tragedy; Shakespeare, he argues, unwisely retained from his sources both the revelations of the Ghost and the assumed madness of the hero; one or the other could have made his play healthy enough, but each makes the other superfluous, and consequently Shakespeare never succeeded in unifying both elements into a convincing drama.⁸³

Now, the conviction that Hamlet plays the madman has received powerful endorsement from the study of Shakespeare's sources. Of them we must here take some knowledge.

The Elizabethan dramatists seized upon their plots where they found them, there being no inhibiting copyright laws. The London theater played much the role in providing literary entertainment that the movie palace (should one now say the television set?) does today for the general public. If a story was well-liked that was excuse enough for its being converted into a play; if an old play had been popular that was enough reason for reworking it into a new one within a few years; just so, a novel or play that is popular today inevitably finds its way to the screen, the leading difference being that now authors collect royalties for use of their plots. Like his fellows, Shakespeare rarely troubled to invent a new plot. What is astonishing is that he could contrive to create vibrant life out of the dull sources he chose; the originals of some of his most moving creations vary from the stupid to the disgusting. For the exercise of his genius apparently almost any plot was good enough to set in motion his imagination.

For his *Hamlet* the possible sources were two; there can be little doubt that he availed himself of one or the other or both. Some eight years before the composition of his play there already existed (we do not know for how long) a drama familiar to the public, on

the same subject. We do not have any copies of this older play, and it would prove a jewel beyond price if a copy should suddenly come to light. But we know, just short of certainty, that this play was written by Thomas Kyd; aside from documentary evidence pointing to his authorship, we know from his epochal *Spanish Tragedy* that Kyd's tastes in drama would have drawn him to the old Hamlet story for its blood-and-thunder possibilities—which, moreover, he would have employed in a manner far different from Shakespeare's. We also know from contemporary Elizabethan reference that this old play had provoked mirth among the judicious because of its recurrently appearing Ghost's crying "like an oyster-wife" in a hollow voice, "Hamlet, revenge!"

We do possess, however, a tale from the French, which was indubitably the source for the old play, and may very well have been Shakespeare's source too, despite the salient differences between his tragedy and the tale—for Shakespeare did not hesitate to change his originals to any extent. The tale appeared in Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1576); there exists an English translation of it under the title of *The Hystorie of Hamblet*, printed in 1608,⁸⁴ some five years after Shakespeare's play first appeared in print. Whether or not there had been earlier publication of the translation it is impossible to say; in any case Shakespeare might very well have read Belleforest's French.

Scholarly judgment, on the whole, has been that Kyd's play was Shakespeare's immediate source, and there is sufficient reason to think so. But since the play is not extant, it is impossible to make any comparisons between it and *Hamlet*. It is, however, not specious to comfort oneself with the thought that in Belleforest's tale we have substantially the same story (except for the Ghost) that Kyd must have told. Kyd was never guilty of any psychological interest or insight in the handling of his characters, and was concerned only with external dramatic effects; he would have been little incited to alter Belleforest's story in any important details. With the addition of one of those fearsome ghosts of his, he had a plot perfect for a man of his tastes.

What was this plot? We thus briefly summarize Belleforest's tale:

¶ The King of Denmark bestows the rule of a province upon two brothers, Horvendile and Fengon (Shakespeare's Hamlet's father and uncle, respectively). Piracy being the fittest employment for men of spirit in those days, Horvendile becomes "the most renowned pirate" then scouring the seas; the King of Norway in envy challenges him "to fight with him body to body" and Horvendile kills him in combat. The King of Denmark, delighted with his brave warrior, gives him his daughter Geruth (Shakespeare's Gertrude) as a bride. Fengon, jealous, decides to murder his brother, who presumably has become King when his wife has inherited the throne. "Having secretly assembled certain men, and perceiving himself strong enough to execute his enterprise," Fengon falls upon Horvendile with his band, *while his brother is banqueting with friends*, and slays the King. [Fengon has already seduced Geruth; but she is so popular with her subjects that the people quickly forgive Fengon his crime when he explains that he has killed Horvendile to protect Geruth from being slain by her spouse. "Boldened and encouraged by such impunity," Fengon now proceeds to marry Geruth, "whom he used as his concubine during good Horvendile's life," thus being guilty of "a two-fold impiety"—"incestuous adultery and parricide murder."

¶ Now, Horvendile's son, Hamlet, [*perceiving himself to be in danger of his life . . . and assuring himself that Fengon would not detract the time to send him the way his father Horvendile was gone*], to beguile the tyrant in his subtleties" hits upon the plan of "counterfeiting the madman with such craft and subtle practices," that he appears to have "utterly lost his wits." He is determined, if he lives long enough to attain "to man's estate," he will "not long delay the time to revenge the death of his father." *His assumed lunacy succeeds in defending "his life from the treasons and practices of the tyrant, his uncle."* But Hamlet reveals so much intelligence behind his seeming insanity, that [the King decides to employ a lady of easy virtue to seduce the Prince and discover what is troubling him. For this end certain courtiers are appointed "to lead Hamlet into a solitary place within the woods," whither they conduct the "fair and beautiful woman."] But Hamlet has been warned by a friend; and the lady herself, being in love with Hamlet, helps foil the plot.

¶ Fengon's next move against his nephew is to have one of his councilors secretly hide in Geruth's chamber behind the arras to hear what speeches might pass between Hamblet and his mother. But Hamblet suspects a trick, and counterfeiting a fit of lunacy, he begins to "come like a cock beating with his arms" upon the hangings of the room; "whereby feeling something stirring under them," he cries, "A rat, a rat!," thrusting his sword through the cloths, and pulls out "the councillor half dead," makes "an end of killing him," and cuts "his body in pieces." He now turns on his mother and upbraids her for marrying and defending the murderer of his father; he also confesses that his insanity is feigned and explains why. She is so much overjoyed to find her son truly sane that she honestly repents, and agrees to do nothing to betray his secret or interfere with his taking vengeance on his uncle.]

¶ Fengon next manages to send Hamblet to England with secret letters to the English King requiring the death of the Prince. But Hamblet, while his companions are asleep, reads the letters, and counterfeits others which order the death of the two messengers and also request that the King of England marry his daughter to Hamblet. The English monarch is pleased with Hamblet, puts the messengers to death, and gives his daughter to the Prince.]

¶ The following year, just as the Danish court is celebrating Hamblet's funeral, the Prince appears. He encourages everyone to drink to excess. When the courtiers are all drunk, he brings down the wall-hangings upon them, fastens the cloths to the floor so that no one can escape, and sets fire to the hall, thus destroying his foes. The King having withdrawn into his chamber, Hamblet follows him there, and severs Fengon's head from his body.] crying: "This just and violent death is a just reward for such as thou art: now go thy ways, and when thou comest in hell see thou forget not to tell thy brother . . . that it was his son that sent thee thither with the message, to the end that being comforted thereby, his soul may rest among the blessed spirits, and quit me of the obligation that bound me to pursue his vengeance upon mine own blood." [Attracted by the flames, the people gather, and Hamblet reveals the truth, supported by his mother's public confession and repentance. His oration so much moves the Danes that he is proclaimed king.]

¶ After his coronation he goes to England to fetch his wife,

but the English King plots Hamblet's death. Warned in time, Hamblet kills this foe, and returns to Denmark with two wives. There, assailed by another uncle, Wiglerus, and betrayed by his second wife, Hamblet is slain. His treacherous widow marries the enemy Wiglerus.]

What appalling nonsense! one is tempted to cry. That is usually one's reaction to the originals which inspired Shakespeare to write his masterpieces. But the very inferiority of those fables causes one to marvel all the more at the genius which could see in them the raw materials for the exploitation of his talents.

Now, we must note some important relationships between this tale and Shakespeare's tragedy:

¶ Plainly, though we need not concern ourselves with most of them, Shakespeare made many changes in the details of the plot (e.g., Hamlet's age, his marrying in England, his revenge on the entire court, the manner of his death; the Queen's permanent repentance, her survival at the end; the character of Ophelia's prototype and her actions, etc.) as well as numerous additions.

¶ There is no Ghost in the tale. That character, we may depend upon it, was added by Kyd, who adored introducing supernatural inciters to vengeance; Kyd may have taken the hint, it seems to us, from Hamblet's last speech to Fengon.

¶ There is no play given by Hamlet before the King and Queen. There was no occasion in the tale for his so doing—nothing for him to prove or discover.

¶ But what is of extreme importance to us is that in the tale:

✕ ¶ 1. Hamlet's father is murdered openly at a public banquet. There is no reason to believe that Kyd would have altered this fundamental, for it would have provided him with exactly the kind of "big scene" of blood letting violence he was addicted to. (In Shakespeare's play *the root of the whole story* is that Hamlet's father was murdered *secretly*.)

✕ ¶ 2. Hamlet feigns insanity for a very good reason: to protect his life against his uncle. (In Shakespeare's play Hamlet has no such motive; Claudius would be glad to live peaceably with his nephew.)

The first of these points will be considered later in the correct place, but we may here observe that this change is one to make of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a totally different story.

The second, however, is germane to the question of Hamlet's feigning insanity. It is not until, late in the play, the King finds himself threatened by Hamlet's conduct (after the presentation of the play before Claudius and the court) that he takes any measures against the Prince's life, and then purely out of self-protection. Until then, Claudius does all he can to make friends with his nephew. Hamlet, therefore, has in Shakespeare's plot no reason for pretending to be mad. The commentators, therefore, have been reduced to finding reasons outside the plot for his assuming madness. The critics, one and all, seem to agree that when Hamlet urges Horatio and Marcellus, after his interview with the Ghost, to swear never to reveal what they have seen

§ How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on)

I, v, 170-72

what he is saying is something like: "No matter how incredibly I may seem to be behaving, since, for example, I might think it expedient hereafter to pretend I am crazy. . . ." (These lines, we are sure, mean nothing of the kind. See pp. 141-47.) It is this passage which is the basis for interpreting Hamlet's conduct throughout the remainder of the play as an assumed insanity!

But listen to Samuel Johnson. With that vexing mixture of bottomless good sense and impoverished imagination so characteristic of him, he once wrote words which brought him to the very threshold of the truth: "Of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity."⁸⁵ How true! And what a pity that Johnson could not have gone a step further in his thinking!

If Hamlet, indeed, *does* nothing that he might have done as a sane man, why then—. Why then, it is not enough to say critically with Professor Stoll that the feigned insanity makes better sense in the old Hamlet tale than in Shakespeare, or to complain with Mr. Robertson that it ruins Shakespeare's play. Nor is it enough to as-

sume, because feigned insanity is an element in the old story, that Shakespeare need have incorporated it in his play; if he could change the whole meaning of the plot by having Hamlet's father murdered secretly, he was quite capable of discarding the feigned insanity as useless to his conception.* It is, rather, high time to be rid of this incubus of an idea that Hamlet pretends to be insane, which is more responsible than any other delusion for distorting the play Shakespeare wrote.

The truth is—why should we longer hesitate to say so?—that in *Hamlet* as Shakespeare wrote it, the hero is neither mad nor feigns insanity at any time. He is perfectly sane and never pretends to be otherwise. Of this the evidence will be presented hereafter.

HAMLET'S PROCRASTINATION

Hamlet "cannot bring himself to kill Claudius."⁸⁶ The liveliest part of the discussion on the play has centered around this point. Hamlet, in the view of many scholars, makes only "poor excuses for delay";⁸⁷ he is forever appealing to his brain to fabricate reasons for "still further delay."⁸⁸ Indeed, "delay," some assert, "is the essence of the plot,"⁸⁹ which is generally felt to be "a study in indecision."⁹⁰

For a long time the reasons for this delay were traced, as might be expected in a tragedy, to a defect in the hero's character.

* Nothing can be proved by reference to what Shakespeare's audience would have expected. The scholars here would have it both ways: on the one hand they try to explain away "inconsistencies" on the grounds that Shakespeare was using inherited materials which he could not manage to work satisfactorily into the body of his play, materials he could not discard because the audience was familiar with an old plot; and, on the other hand, they account for the very significant alterations Shakespeare was ever making in the plots he adopted, on the grounds that plays were given in such swift succession in the many Elizabethan theaters, that the audiences could never have kept track of the plots!

It is interesting, in this connection, to remember how variously the Greek tragedians manipulated stories which were familiar to *every member* of their audiences. (Compare the three *Electra* plays, for example.)

"TOO SENSITIVE"

Mackenzie, author of the lachrymose *Man of Feeling*, who specialized in downtrodden innocence, seems to have been the inaugurator (in print) of the earliest of the "subjective" explanations of the tragedy—the sentimental notion that Hamlet is too delicately constituted, too sensitive to commit an act of violence such as vengeance requires: "We see a man who in other circumstances would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct."⁹¹

But it was the name of the great Goethe which has given most authority to this view. A sizeable part of his most important novel, *Wilhelm Meister*, is given over to a consideration of Hamlet,* and he thus strikingly expounds his theory of the hero's character:

"The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

"In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole play seems to me to be composed. There is an oak tree planted in a costly jar which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom: the roots expand, the jar is shivered. A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him,—not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils, is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts, yet still without recovering his peace of mind."⁹²

* Which fact may be responsible for the tradition of introducing the endless passages of "intellectual discussion," those dreadful *longueurs*, in the German novel. Thomas Mann won considerable acclaim for these pretentious stretches of dullness in his works.

It will be no news that there are few forces at work in society equal in power to that of fashion. People have not hesitated to go as far as suicide when suicide has been fashionable; not so very long ago there was, indeed, a wave of suicides because of a song variously named as "Black Sunday" or "Blue Monday"; all over the Western world it was *à la mode* to buy a recording of it, go home and play it, and then kill yourself—though it is hard to know why, unless you were a lover of music. But even the boldest and most original minds in any given epoch are subject to the influences of fashion without being aware they are. How much of Dante's love for Beatrice and Petrarch's for Laura, despite the terrible sincerity of these poets, was owing to the medieval traditions of courtly love which urged a bard give his heart to a woman he had no thoughts of possessing, and to whom he remained faithful while he and she married some one else? How much of Byron's life is owing to its peculiar circumstances, and how much to the model of the Storm-and-Stress antisocial hero of his period, which Byron may be said to have incarnated? How much of our own F. Scott Fitzgerald's self-destruction to his personal weakness, and how much to the fashions of the Jazz Age? No one can answer these questions because these men no less helped make the fashion than became victims of it.

The excessively sensitive, easily crushed type of hero was epidemic in the Romantic Movement, and Goethe himself was considerably responsible for the vogue. His youthful indiscretion, the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, achieved a huge success, and because of its hero it became a sign of personal superiority that a man could be so delicately fabricated as to be hurt at every turn of experience.* By the time Goethe had finished his *Wilhelm Meister*, he bitterly regretted *Werther* and rejected its insipid hero, seeing him for the absurdity he was. It was a matter of deep chagrin to the greatest of the Germans that he continued to be known as the author of *Werther* even after he had given the world *Faust*. Nevertheless, when he looked at Hamlet, he himself fell victim to the mode he

* *Werther* too started an epidemic of suicides. For a time it was *de rigueur* to follow the lead of its hero, and you had hardly any soul at all unless one fine day you were found with a pistol in one hand, a copy of *Werther* opened at the appropriate passage in the other, Werther's waistcoat on your corpse, and a bullet through your silly head.

had helped create, and conceived Shakespeare's hero in his imagination as another Werther, an exquisitely and morbidly sensitive youth unable to cope with the world.

Actually, although it is Goethe who foisted this sentimental Hamlet upon the world, that Hamlet, like Werther, was already "in the air." The seeds for such characters had been sown by the sentimentalists who flourished side by side with the rationalists of early eighteenth-century England. (The well-balanced Addison, for example, had such a partner in Steele.) Goethe, like so many young literary men of his generation in France and Germany, was an Anglomaniac, madly in love with these English sentimentalists, and deeply influenced by them. It is impossible to say what Englishmen had begun the process of inventing a sentimental Hamlet, but it has only recently become evident by the publication of Boswell's *London Journal* that a "too sensitive" Hamlet was already being talked about not only before the composition of *Wilhelm Meister* but a whole decade even before the creation of the prototype Werther himself.

Boswell records under the date of April 6, 1763 in his journal (seventeen years before Mackenzie's words on Hamlet) a conversation with the celebrated actor, Thomas Sheridan (not to be confused with the playwright Richard B. Sheridan): "He gave us, however, a most ingenious dissertation on the character of Hamlet. . . . He made it clear to us that Hamlet . . . is . . . a young man of good heart and fine feelings who had led a studious contemplative life, and so become delicate and irresolute. He [Shakespeare] shows him in very unfortunate circumstances, the author of which he knows he ought to punish, but wants strength of mind to execute what he thinks right and wishes to do. In this dilemma he makes Hamlet feign himself mad, as in that way he might put his uncle to death with less fear of the consequences of such an attempt. . . . His timidity being once admitted, all the strange fluctuations which we perceive in him may be easily traced to that source. . . . He endeavors to stir up his languid mind to a manly boldness, but in vain. For he still continues backward to revenge, hesitates about believing the Ghost to be the real spirit of his father, so much that the Ghost chides him for being tardy. When he has a fair opportunity of killing his uncle, he neglects it and says he will not take him off while at his

devotions, but wait till he is in the midst of some atrocious crime, that he may put him to death with his guilt upon his head. Now this, if really from the heart, would make Hamlet the most black, revengeful man. But it coincides better with his character to suppose him here endeavoring to make an excuse to himself for his delay. . . . In short, Sheridan made out his character accurately, clearly, and justly."

Boswell, himself one of the most sentimental of men, as the amorous passages in his life amusingly demonstrate, obviously liked this sentimental view of the Prince. The actor Sheridan, who may or may not have fathered the view, was a sentimentalist too; he employed, he said, the poems of Ossian as one would "a thermometer" to "judge the warmth of everybody's heart." At any rate, his analysis of Hamlet is substantially like the Hamlet which Mackenzie, Goethe, Schlegel, and Coleridge each much later "discovered." Goethe, being a man of genius, impressed his Hamlet upon the world, until it was superseded by Coleridge's variation. Later in the nineteenth century a French scholar could say witheringly: "Let us put aside altogether the notion that Hamlet . . . was in the mind of his creator the type of the German race. . . . People here [i.e., in France] are . . . inclined to make a Werther out of Hamlet." ⁹³

Goethe's position has been in our century firmly restated by Mr. Trench: "Made for a philosopher, he [Hamlet] has been put into the situation of a politician; made for a moralist, he is required to be a manslayer; suited for the production of theory and idealism, he is asked by Fate to produce energy and practical efficiency." ⁹⁴ This attitude, even more recently, has been echoed by Mr. Fergusson: Hamlet is "defenceless and uninstructed in the midst of life," ⁹⁵ and also by Mr. Neilson, who finds the Prince to be "a person more unfitted for the task allotted to him" than any hero on record, ⁹⁶ and who believes the end of the play to show that Hamlet's "mind and heart are bruised. His youth is maimed." ⁹⁷

In 1946 this Hamlet was able to satisfy the criteria of *le dernier cri* in literary fashions, Existentialism; it was said that Hamlet is not "existent but rather . . . passing through an existential phase"; but at a certain point "his values are translated from 'reason' to 'absurdity'"; finally, "at the end the focus shifts"—his earliest attitude of "absurd sensibility" has been changed to "normal sensibility"

and he sees that "the existential insight was after all delusion."⁹⁸ We should hope *anyone* would see that!

"TOO IRRESOLUTE"

Such oversensitive and professionally incapable men, though uncurrent nowadays as heroes, were very dear to the Romantics. It is therefore not surprising that quite independently of each other a German and an Englishman should have simultaneously conceived identical theories of Hamlet in this vein. Unhappily, Coleridge felt called upon to defend himself against the charge of plagiarizing Schlegel.⁹⁹ He need not have bothered; the temper of the times rendered such an occurrence beyond the province of the accidental. It is much more astonishing that quite independently of each other Messrs. James and Lange (if we were correctly taught) should, as psychologists, have conceived simultaneously the fascinating notion that when you see a bear, you first run away and *after that* are frightened! We accept the coincidence of that discovery readily enough, though we are glad to say that we have never had the opportunity of testing its validity.

Schlegel, whose version was the earlier in print, described Hamlet as procrastinating because he was too irresolute to act: "Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else. From expressions of religious confidence he passes over to sceptical doubts. He believes in the ghost of his father when he sees it; and as soon as it has disappeared, it appears to him almost in the light of a deception. He has even got so far as to say, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.' The poet loses himself with his hero in the labyrinths of thought, in which we find neither end nor beginning. . . . A voice commissioned . . . by heaven from another world demands vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect. The criminals are at last punished . . . by an accidental blow, and not in a manner requisite to announce with solemnity a warning example of justice to the world."¹⁰⁰

It is Coleridge, however, who by the brilliance of his exposition has given the world that conception of the hero's character which is still (unfortunately) the most universally accepted by the general public. Shakespeare wished, he says, in our hero's character "to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our at-

tention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our mind,—an *equilibrium* between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a color not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, and almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action. . . . Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but *he vacillates from sensibility and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve.*" ¹⁰¹ *

An analysis radiantly phrased! But an analysis true, not of Hamlet, but of Coleridge himself. Poor Coleridge! No one, during his greatest creative years, less understood the distinction between imagined and actually written books. If only we could somehow recapture from the air the hundreds of finished masterpieces he talked into it! Has any other poet so firmly maintained a claim to immortality on the basis of so little an accomplishment?—one completed poem (*The Ancient Mariner*), two fragments (*Kubla Khan* and the first part of *Christabel*), and some splendid passages in a handful of pieces (as in *Dejection* and *Frost at Midnight*).† For him it was always so much simpler to imagine a book, to resolve to do it, than to sit down and write it.

Like the public, innumerable scholars follow Coleridge's interpretation.¹⁰² Dowden finds Hamlet "disqualified for action by his excess of the reflective tendency, and by his unstable will."¹⁰³ Mr. E. K. Chambers describes the hero's situation as "the tragedy of the *intellectuel*, of the impotence of the overcultivated imagination and the over-subtilized reasoning powers to meet the call of everyday life for practical efficiency"—for him Hamlet, whose "real interest is all in speculation," is "the academic man, the philosopher, brought suddenly into the world of strenuous action, and proving himself

* The italics in the last sentence are ours.

† Yet, for all that, who would exchange *The Ancient Mariner* or either of those two fragments for nine-tenths of the *Collected Works* of that Wordsworth he so catastrophically worshipped—who, that is, except the schoolma'ams? For, O the difference to them!

but the clay pot there."¹⁰⁴ Hamlet is depicted as "a habitual dweller in his own thoughts,"¹⁰⁵ as coming to catastrophe because "he thought too much,"¹⁰⁶ as having his will power atrophied by "his power to think,"¹⁰⁷ or because he has a genius for inaction,¹⁰⁸ or because he can act only in his imagination.¹⁰⁹ Another "existentialist" believes that Hamlet does not act because "he is the sage who has penetrated or thinks he has penetrated to the very essence of being, the essence of living, and who therefore, understanding the futility of all activity, settles into the calm of inaction."¹¹⁰

Slight variations are played upon this theme: Hamlet exercises his passion in words rather than deeds;¹¹¹ his will is broken "through an abnormal development, not only of the reflective but of the emotional faculties";¹¹² he is the type "undeveloped poet who adds to all he thinks and feels the spirit of a nimble and passionate imagination," remaining the while "silent,* reserved, meditative," and "unaccustomed to action, untrained in its struggles";¹¹³ his defeat is that of the type artist, who fails because it is his nature to be impractical;¹¹⁴ he is the victim of a conflict due to the fact that he was born an active Dane but educated at the University to be a reflective German.¹¹⁵

For some he is irresolute because he is the idealist who loathes the world of actuality,¹¹⁶ and becomes perverted into an "embittered and passionate" pessimist.¹¹⁷ Or, he is no idealist at all but a convinced fatalist: he is convinced of "man's impotence against an all-powerful providence";¹¹⁸ he surrenders fatalistically all "his personal responsibility" to act;¹¹⁹ experience teaches him at last no longer to be passion's slave but to be resigned.¹²⁰ Or, he was always a pessimist;¹²¹ though inwardly a "volcano."¹²² For all his "intellectual keenness" Hamlet's "aimless weakness," in the catastrophic outcome, "spreads around far more misery than the most inconsiderate violence."¹²³

Among the more diverting of the refinements of Coleridge's view are the convictions: that Hamlet "did not lose his mind but found it" in the revelation of his father's murder, though in the shock of "that discovery he forgot a crime and ignored a duty";¹²⁴

* Surely silence has by no one else been achieved with so many words!

that his trouble was not in thinking too much but in thinking the wrong way;¹²⁵ that he opposed life itself and rejected all its activities;¹²⁶ that so far from being in any way noble or philosophical, he was simply a blundering, mouthing ideologist.¹²⁷ *

A measurement of the wide acceptance of Coleridge's conception of the hero as the irresolute thinker is the fact that Professor Butcher in his great work on Aristotle's *Poetics* feels it necessary to modify the Aristotelian concept of a tragic hero (as well as his own healthy understanding of Shakespearean tragedy) to accommodate this view: "Much more rarely, as in Hamlet, can character become dramatic by an intellectual and masterly inactivity which offers resistance to the motives prompting ordinary men to action. . . . There is in Hamlet a strenuous inaction, a *not-acting*, which is in itself a form of action. . . . [However,] most of Shakespeare's characters, like the heroes of Greek drama, are strong and dominant natures, they are of a militant quality of mind."¹²⁸

And so they are!

"TOO MELANCHOLY"

We have already noted the commentaries which describe Hamlet not so much as a lunatic as a victim of melancholia. Some scholars ascribe to this melancholy the cause for Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius. Just as there are clearly affinities between the Goethe—"too sensitive" theory and the Schlegel-Coleridge—"too irresolute" view, so there are affinities between the latter and this notion of Hamlet's procrastinating through melancholy. For this explanation

* George Bernard Shaw's Hamlet was a variation of Coleridge's too, though, naturally, with a Shavian twist: Hamlet "is a man in whom the common personal passions are so superseded by wider and rarer interests, and so discouraged by a degree of critical self-consciousness, which makes the practical efficiency of the instinctive man on the lower plane impossible to him, that he finds the duties dictated by conventional revenge and ambition as disagreeable a burden as commerce is to the poet. Even his instinctive sexual impulses offend his intellect; so that when he meets the woman who excites them he invites her to join him in a bitter and scornful criticism of their joint absurdity." ("The Saturday Review," October 2, 1897.) By the way, not all poets have found commerce a disagreeable burden, as Shakespeare's biography very specifically indicates.

the chief spokesman has been the eloquent Professor Bradley, who partly accepts and partly rejects the Coleridgean concept.

He agrees that "even if the view (i.e., Coleridge's) itself does not suffice, the *description* given by its adherents of Hamlet's state of mind, as we see him in the last four Acts, is, on the whole and so far as it goes, a true description. The energy of resolve is dissipated in an endless brooding on the deed required."¹²⁹ But the theory as a whole "degrades Hamlet and travesties the play," for Hamlet "at any *other* time and in any *other* circumstances than those presented would have been perfectly equal to his task."¹³⁰ If he stands helpless before his duty, "the direct cause was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances—a state of profound melancholy."¹³¹ The melancholy induced the excessive reflection, and the latter was but a symptom of the inaction. "The moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature,"¹³² made clear by her hasty marriage, has sunk "his whole being towards annihilation"—and in the midst of this disgust with life, Hamlet is commanded by the Ghost to wreak vengeance. "His soul leaps up in passion to answer this demand. But it comes too late. It does but strike home the last rivet in the melancholy which holds him bound."¹³³ And it is this melancholy which "accounts for the main fact, Hamlet's inaction."¹³⁴

Mr. Knight carries the idea even further. Hamlet, as he sees him, endures intense soul-sickness and melancholia.¹³⁵ "The symptoms are, horror at the fact of death and an equal detestation of life, a sense of uncleanness and evil in the things of nature; a disgust at the physical body of man; bitterness, cynicism, hate."¹³⁶ Hamlet does not avenge his father's death not out of hate of bloodshed, "but because his 'wit's diseased'; his will is snapped and useless, like a broken leg."¹³⁷ He does not kill Claudius for that would not have brought his father back to life, nor given life to Hamlet "who had so long lived in Death," nor "have altered the Universal Scheme. To Hamlet, the universe smells of mortality."¹³⁸ "In the universe of this play. . . he is the only discordant element, the only hindrance to happiness, health, and prosperity: a living death in the midst of life."¹³⁹

Professor Adams agrees that disillusionment leads to Hamlet's melancholy.¹⁴⁰ Miss Campbell also believes Hamlet not naturally

melancholy, but made so by grief, a grief "that renders him dull, that effaces memory, that makes him guilty of the sin of sloth."¹⁴¹ But there are those who believe Hamlet's character to be fundamentally melancholic.¹⁴² To bolster that contention, parallels have been cited between Shakespeare's lines and various quasi-scientific works on melancholy; one scholar is convinced that the dramatist employed Dr. Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) as a textbook to supply his hero's traits;¹⁴³ another confidently declares: "That Hamlet is to be accepted as essentially a melancholic can no longer be in doubt, now that contemporary sources dealing with this type . . . have been explored."¹⁴⁴ While others argue that the Prince is the typical Elizabethan melancholic,¹⁴⁵ one scholar demonstrates that Shakespeare has rather pre-envisioned the conception of melancholy later to be propounded by Kant;¹⁴⁶ and there are those who think Shakespeare's understanding of this disease was worthy of a brain specialist.¹⁴⁷ Hamlet's melancholy is described as purely psychic,¹⁴⁸ and as resulting in a serious monomania of pessimism.¹⁴⁹ But one commentator remarks that if this melancholy does cause Hamlet to procrastinate, it is allied to his "conscientious scruples against blood revenge."¹⁵⁰

And that new perspective brings us to our next theory.

"TOO MUCH THE MAN OF MORALS"

It was inevitable, one supposes, that someone would start a school of criticism to explain Hamlet's delay in terms of moral scruple, though of all "explanations" this exceeds all others, even the Freudian, in silliness.

Ulrici began it. "Even when Hamlet has assured himself of the King's guilt by the device of the play," he says, "he still hesitates, and forms no resolve; he is still beset with doubts and scruples,—but preeminently *moral* doubts and *moral* scruples! Most justly. Even though the King were trebly a fratricide, in a *Christian* sense it would still be a sin to put him to death with one's own hand, without a trial and without justice. In Hamlet, therefore, we behold the Christian struggling with the natural man and its demand for revenge, in a tone rendered still louder and deeper by the hereditary prejudices of the Teutonic nations. The natural man spurs him on to immediate action, and charges his doubts with cowardice and

irresolution; the Christian spirit . . . draws him back, though still resisting. He hesitates, and delays, and tortures himself with a vain attempt to reconcile these conflicting impulses."¹⁵¹

This view has, of course, been widely enough endorsed.¹⁵² "Hamlet's responsibility is to his own conscience. . . . Why should a man like Hamlet, noble of nature, gentle, thoughtful, scrupulous, eager to believe the best of his fellows—" asks Quiller-Couch, "why should such a man *not* shrink from the deed?"¹⁵³ "His higher nature," agrees a scholar, "will not allow him to commit murder."¹⁵⁴ His inner promptings are to kill Claudius, but Hamlet triumphs over them, avers another, and will not act in violation of his conscience as he must do if he obey the Ghost's behest.¹⁵⁵ Hamlet, in all these opinions, is too much the Christian to kill anyone.

The point is sometimes made with a certain diminution of ethical loftiness of tone: the task appointed Hamlet is beneath his dignity, the world being too pernicious a place for him to stoop to take vengeance in it;¹⁵⁶ or, Hamlet's struggle is a cornerstone in the history of the law's evolution, for his battle is between the old morality of blood revenge and the new *legal* method of allowing the law to punish offenders;¹⁵⁷ or, he is a man caught between the values of two worlds, the medieval and the modern.¹⁵⁸ (A pretty idea.) Sometimes a little quaintness intrudes: Hamlet's problem is to discover a way of committing the great sin of murder without sinning;¹⁵⁹ or, it is to avoid seeming to kill the King for the purpose of seizing the throne, since Hamlet is the heir apparent;¹⁶⁰ or, he solves his inability to overcome his scorn of the world by refusing to take part in its affairs and turns to amateur theatricals instead.¹⁶¹

Before proceeding, the gentlemen may prefer to take off their hats (if wearing a hat is their normal dress for reading a book) and the ladies to cover their heads. For now, as we come to recent opinion in this Hamlet-too-much-the-Christian vein, the subject takes on a religiosity and a grandiloquence which are calculated to be awe-inspiring. We are about to pass from variations on Hamlet's mere scrupulosity to loftier measures. You may read what immediately follows in the same spirit which prompts some people to go see and hear *Parsifal* on Good Friday—as a substitute for attending church, though we cannot guarantee that either exercise will satisfactorily settle the destiny of your immortal soul. Now we hear not how Ham-

let is too moral to kill, but how he has been divinely appointed to commit murder.

Hamlet, we read, is concerned only with the Eternal and cannot be bothered with personal vengeance; for paramount to the tragedy is "the conception of Omniscient Providence controlling the destinies of men."¹⁶² Professor Craig sees the whole play as a spiritual struggle for the hero before he is ready for his holy mission to kill Claudius: "Before a man can act effectively he must master his own soul." It is for this reason that Hamlet procrastinates. "All men hesitate to take up arms against a sea of troubles. . . . All the blame bestowed upon Hamlet as a procrastinator rests squarely on the shoulders of all men, and they know it."¹⁶³ (We hope, reader, that you will henceforth cease making Hamlet *your* scapegoat!) And Mr. Fergusson adds to these heavy harmonies a somber tone: Hamlet does accomplish "some sort of purgatorial progress for himself and Denmark."¹⁶⁴

The anthem swells, and we behold Hamlet becoming transformed into a kind of combination Parsifal-Kundry to Denmark's Amfortas. (On second thought, gentlemen, we think you had *better* take off your hats.) To provide the dark organ-peddalling as a background for this hymn of regeneration, Miss Spurgeon, having studied the imagery of the play, notes that the typical figure employed in *Hamlet* to describe the condition of Denmark is the ulcer or tumor. Hence she concludes that "the problem in *Hamlet* is not predominantly that of the will and reason, of a mind too philosophic or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly: he [Shakespeare] sees it pictorially *not as the problem of an individual at all*, but as something greater and even more mysterious, as a *condition* for which the individual is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him, but which . . . relentlessly annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike. That is the tragedy of *Hamlet*, and it is perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life."¹⁶⁵ (This is harder than bezique!)

Denmark being thus foully decayed, Hamlet's business therefore is not to kill the King but to "cleanse the world of the virulent poison that has entered it."¹⁶⁶ (One feels like hushing into shame the less noble commentators who say, in a manner dangerously near *laissez-faire* or *allez-au-Diable*, that Hamlet knows he *cannot* reform

the world of its rottenness, feels there is not enough point to killing the King, and hence refrains from doing so.¹⁶⁷)

But Mr. Roy Walker and Mr. S. F. Johnson soar to sing golden hymns at heaven's gate. The latter says of Hamlet that "he is the instrument of an inscrutable Providence to whom man is of more value than many sparrows," and that before he dies Hamlet arrives "at an attitude that bridges the gap between the real and the ideal and transcends the conflict between appearance and reality."¹⁶⁸ Mr. Walker wings even higher, for he believes of Hamlet that "only in his weaker moments did he conceive his duty to be no more than the murder of his uncle. His innermost consciousness was struggling towards the realization of order in human affairs." (The round has come full circle. Now instead of Hamlet's problem being connected with the killing of Claudius—as the play, if *that* has any authority in the matter, would seem to imply throughout—that issue is purely incidental to Hamlet's purposes.) Hamlet's waiting to kill the King "was the waiting which is a struggle to attain the divine spontaneity in which humanity is transfigured into the image of a divinity that shapes our ends."¹⁶⁹

We feel somehow lacking in duty that we cannot here summon a rumble of kettledrums and the bright blare of trumpets to render more sublime the period of these uplifting organ tones. But we cannot. We only pause to admire that the business of killing a man, even though that man be a king, can be made to figure symbolically as so holy an enterprise. It is disconcerting to reflect that assassination can be transmogrified once more in our own times into a sacred rite. How did Frazer ever allow himself to omit Hamlet from the voluminous instances of *The Golden Bough*?

We also pause to wonder what this rigmarole has to do with authentic drama.

"TOO COMPLEX-RIDDEN"

Now we need a new music as the formidable company of psychoanalysts looms on the horizon—something like the obscene wind-effects Strauss so cannily employs in *Tyl Eulenspiegel*, perhaps. But maybe, after all, we may stay with the organ *—for we are informed

* Psychoanalysts, note this interesting *lapsus calami*.

in the pages of one of these authorities that the division between the divine and the obscene is not so sharp as we have imagined, that the sublime may be "connected by an invisible navel string with the coarse sexual, with what people call the obscene."¹⁷⁰

Again we move from theory to theory by gradation. The distinguished psychoanalyst Ernest Jones singles out Ulrici, inaugurator of the "too scrupulous" theory of Hamlet's procrastination, as the first critic to take an intelligent approach, since Ulrici was the earliest to stress the hero's "internal conflict."¹⁷¹ Presumably Ulrici thus opened the first portal leading to the twilight regions of Hamlet's unconscious, where complexes have a merry time of it in the dark. (G. H. H. H.)

By concentrating on Hamlet's preoccupation with his mother, some of the more purely literary scholars have helped pave the road for the psychoanalysts. "Hamlet's inertia derives partly at least from his reaction to his mother's re-marriage," says one.¹⁷² He is interested much less in killing the King than in the salvation of the Queen, offers another.¹⁷³ But the road is immeasurably widened by the half-timid concession of some that "unconscious" elements may be basic to the understanding of the tragedy. Professor Tillyard stoutly defends the detection of "unacknowledged motives," for the "world of *Hamlet* is one in which the unexpressed motives are likely to count."¹⁷⁴ Mr. Clutton-Brock goes further and boldly states that Hamlet's unconscious mind shrinks from killing Claudius because he is eager above all to *forget* his father's murder as well as his mother's second marriage;¹⁷⁵ to take vengeance would be to stamp on his memory what he is eager to obliterate from it.

But these harmless flirtations with Freudianism are as nothing to the bold deeds of the professionals. It was the master himself who began a magnificent onslaught on the subject—and that was, says Doctor Jones, as it should have been: Hamlet's problem is the "Sphinx of modern literature," and it was only "fitting" that the man who solved the riddle of the "Theban one" (i.e., by inventing the Oedipus complex) should have "solved the riddle of this Sphinx"¹⁷⁶ *—Sigmund Freud.

* Would it be too much temerity to remark that Oedipus was certainly the one man on record who could not be accused of harboring

Let us, however, listen to the words of the master. Hamlet, he says, can do almost anything except kill the man "who did away with his father and has taken his father's place with his mother." Instead of loathing Claudius, he feels self-reproach because he knows himself in wish to be "no better than the murderer" he is supposed to punish.¹⁷⁷ Hamlet has long felt the incestuous urge towards his mother and his feelings are "hysterical" because Claudius has done what he himself has always wished to do, killed Hamlet's father and mated with Gertrude. And that is the reason why Shakespeare was impelled to write the play, for it is a presentation of his own complexes at the time of composition. *Hamlet* was written immediately "after the death of Shakespeare's father (1601)," * and the confused feelings disturbing Shakespeare himself at the time were mirrored in Hamlet's father-hate and mother-fixation. In another work, however, Freud, although repeating the imputation of an Oedipus complex to Hamlet, comes to different conclusions about the author's role in the composition of *Hamlet*. There he notes that the name "William Shakespeare" is probably a pseudonym to conceal the identity of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (whose vogue as author of Shakespeare's plays has somewhat displaced the claims of the Baconians), who "lost a beloved and admired father while he was still a boy, and completely repudiated his mother, who contracted a new marriage soon after her husband's death."¹⁷⁸ †

Freud is fascinating on the incidents in *Hamlet*. Nothing is more diverting than his analysis of the manner in which Hamlet's father was killed, as re-enacted in the pantomime before Claudius. The dropping of poison into the monarch's ear "can only be explained by the latent sexual meaning. . . . The poison stands for sperm. . . . The ear is the reception chamber. . . . The double meaning given it bespeaks the sadistic conception of coitus" formed by a child in the course of its sexual investigations. Hamlet identifies himself with the murderer, not only because Claudius has killed

an Oedipus complex? The Greek Oedipus had no opportunity to acquire complexes of any kind towards the woman he married.

* In 1601 Shakespeare was a mere child of thirty-seven, and had been a father himself several times! But that is probably irrelevant.

† There is nothing in history to match the calm certainty of your psychoanalyst. He has his answer, whichever way the facts seem to turn.

Hamlet's father, as the Prince has yearned to do himself, but also as the "deputy of the parental sexual activity."¹⁷⁹ Hamlet, therefore, cannot kill the man with whom he unconsciously identifies himself. Indeed, he "actually revels" in the murder of his father which Claudius has committed for him.¹⁸⁰

Now, you may wonder what Shakespeare would think of all this. The answer is that that would not at all matter. A Freudian disciple, after repeating the Oedipus complex charge against our hero, and ascribing the delay to the fact that "the murder of his father was a deed" Hamlet had "long harbored as a design in his unconscious," adds that Shakespeare himself "was not conscious of this hidden" motive,¹⁸¹ and after all why should he be? "Poetry should not be too apparent, lest its beauty change into atrocity."¹⁸² As Emil Ludwig says in a burst of understandable indignation: If "Shakespeare could regain life long enough to read Freudian explanations, scales would fall from his eyes and he would—in the role provided by that even greater master of the drama, Freud—exclaim: 'At last I understand my Hamlet!'"¹⁸³ There is no reason to suppose, however, that Mr. Ludwig's irony could mitigate by a degree the Olympian calm of the Freudians. They would simply assure him he had spoken literal truth—unconsciously, of course.

Doctor Jones' emphasis is more on Hamlet's horror at the Queen's incestuous marriage than at his father's murder,¹⁸⁴ and the scholarly Mr. Walley also believes that the Prince finds his mother "more reprehensible" than Claudius, that he would rather take vengeance on her, but, being asked only to kill Claudius, is thereby prevented from taking action.¹⁸⁵ Again and again it is insisted that Hamlet's chief trait is his incestuous love for his mother,¹⁸⁶ that his conscious mind hates the King but his "subconscious blindly identifies his own personality with the lover of his mother."¹⁸⁷

Quite recently a leading psychoanalyst has taken an even bolder stand. What if the late king had not been murdered? What would Hamlet be like then? The answer: Even if Hamlet's father had died a natural death, and even if Gertrude had not remarried, Hamlet would still feel hostile to his mother. And this is the process by which he arrives at his hostility: Father's death "has removed the superior rival for Mother's love"—i.e., Father himself. Those "repressed infantile wishes" for sexual commerce with Mother threaten now

to emerge. "Here is the occasion to take the place of Father" as Mother's lover. But the conscious mind rejects the idea, and Father's figure is as a result glorified, while Mother becomes the object of "antagonism and resentment" as a measure of self-protection from temptation on the part of the son. The more Hamlet is impelled to assume his father's place, the more his resentment against his mother will grow.¹⁸⁸ Obviously, the *manner* of Father's death, therefore, could not materially alter Hamlet's essential frustrations.*

Doctor Jones has his own slant on Hamlet's reasons for not being able to kill Claudius. Hamlet hates the King, but it is the hatred of one jealous "evil-doer towards his successful fellow." He can never denounce Claudius with the same passion with which he upbraids his mother because denunciation of the King would only "stimulate to activity his own unconscious and 'repressed' complexes. . . . In reality his uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself."¹⁹⁰

Doctor Stekel has truly a new notion, however. Hamlet, according to him, cannot kill Claudius because the Prince has too many doubts about his origin. "Who could vouch that Hamlet is not his uncle's son if his mother was intimate with him before the father's death? Thus, Hamlet would kill his own father if he were to take revenge on his uncle for the death of his official father."¹⁹¹ Considering Hamlet's age, this notion would lend an air almost of respectability to Gertrude's adultery, when its long life is calculated. And as for Claudius, how his passion must have grown with the decades! Why should we even consider Hamlet's procrastination in the face of Claudius? Why should Hamlet's few months claim our attention when we think of the patient years in which Claudius must, according to Stekel's view, have waited to do the deed? The possibilities become more engaging every minute. This thirty years

* With becoming modesty, this author concludes these speculations: "If this discussion can be considered at all as an original, analytic contribution to the Hamlet problem, it may deserve that title only as a by-product of the curiosity of a psychologist who sometimes goes astray in his thoughts when he explores the yet undiscovered recesses of the human mind."¹⁸⁹

of procrastinating on Claudius' part make him a marvelous subject for psychoanalytical inspection (why has *he* been overlooked?), and one feels that one would like to know more about him.

Who was his father?
Who was his mother?
Had he a sister?
What of his brother?
Or, was there a dearer one
Still, and a nearer one
Yet, than all other?

Before departing, however unwillingly, from the companionship of this exciting school of commentators, the reader might be interested in two little variations on the Freudian theme. One of them takes us momentarily into pediatrics: Shakespeare's parents had five children between Shakespeare's third and sixteenth years, and that is why he has made Hamlet procrastinate; that delay embodies the adult's reviving his "three-year-old's intense reactions" to the first of his mother's pregnancies and births.¹⁹² The other, original enough, makes Hamlet feel unconsciously far from hostile to Claudius, who is for him a second "protective" father; while Claudius is alive Hamlet is thus saved from indulging his desire to possess the Queen; what Hamlet would prefer to do is commit *matricide*. Because he is not up to that, he procrastinates. Not until the Queen is dead will he be able to carry out the Ghost's injunctions to kill his father's slayer; once Gertrude has drunk the fatal drink, however, Hamlet, freed at last of his incestuous obsession, can kill the King."¹⁹³

We have heard rumors of the existence of a "homosexual" rather than an "Oedipus complex" explanation of Hamlet's dilemma, but have been unable to track one down. Here and there, of course, the Freudians have thrown out a vague remark to the effect that there "is something homosexual" in Hamlet's conduct while they are busily expounding the "Oedipus" theory. What is adorable about psychoanalysis is that you can always prove anything you like from any given body of facts. We therefore, to supply the deficiency, submit a "homosexual theory" of Hamlet—since in all fairness to those of that persuasion they should not be thus ruthlessly

excluded—based on the same evidence employed to prove the "Oedipus" contention:

1. Hamlet had an unnatural love for his father (as witness his glowing references to him) and hence always resented his mother, wishing to be in *her* place. This would neatly explain his rejection of Ophelia quite as well as the Oedipus argument that he gave her up because of his mother. Hence, too, his hatred for Claudius, who killed the man Hamlet loved. He delays because people of his sexual orientation shrink from action.

2. Or, he secretly loves Claudius, too, and cannot for that reason kill him. To strengthen this view there is, besides his rejection of Ophelia, his suspicious closeness to Horatio, who is very virile. One might also bring in the fact that he speaks much more courteously of Laertes than he does to his sister.

3. Or, since homosexuals are notoriously attached to their mothers, Hamlet has always hated his father, is glad he is dead (though *not* for "Oedipus complex" reasons) and is really grateful to Claudius for the murder. Naturally, being a man of honor, Hamlet cannot *consciously* admit his gratitude or attraction to his uncle, and hence speaks bitterly of him, while taking no action against him. Etc.,etc.

It is probably wrong to jest about the "Oedipus complex" version of Hamlet, however, for the Freudians have made it no laughing matter. The damage they have wrought the play is incalculable. Their notions have taken firm hold of the stage (and screen), and ever since the Gielgud production every representation of the play on Broadway has adopted this view; the scene in Gertrude's closet has been made (notably in Evans' and Olivier's performances) to crawl with incestuous overtones. As a result many playgoers must by this time feel that such was Shakespeare's meaning. Moreover, the Shakespeare scholars themselves, almost without being aware of it, have now for decades over-emphasized Hamlet's closeness to his mother. For that one holds the performances of the play responsible. But it is a false and vicious reading of the play's meaning, and it is high time that there be an end to it.

We draw some faint comfort from the complaints of one psychoanalyst, who feels that actors now lift these "Oedipus" stirrings into the realm of the conscious! He objects to the Olivier movie on

the grounds that this Hamlet, having read the accounts of Freud and Jones, has accepted and absorbed them "not wisely but too well."¹⁹⁴ The Prince, thus, addresses his mother as though she were his sweetheart, and the incestuous barrier between them begins to disappear; they are ready at any moment to embrace as lovers. Olivier, in sum, did not permit his feelings to *remain* in the realm of the unconscious, where they should be left—they were all too plain. The analyst observes cryptically that although he believes the "Oedipus complex" theory correct, "I do not believe an actor should act the part according to this or any interpretation." (He ought to be well pleased with most Shakespearean performances.)

At any rate, whether for reasons of *submerging* the incest back into the unconscious, or for any other reason, one would thank future Hamlets to forget Freud and mother fixations, and behave a little more normally with Gertrude. In his dealings with her, Hamlet has incitements enough to act with passion of quite another variety.

OTHER VOICES, OTHER LUNES

There are, naturally, some "subjective" explanations of Hamlet's adjournment of vengeance which fit into none of the classifications we have looked at.

At least once it has been maintained that Hamlet is a woman, brought up as a man, and in love with Horatio¹⁹⁵—a theory that would seem to account for Hamlet's reluctance to kill Claudius and to marry Ophelia. The idea was incorporated long ago into a German movie,* with a Scandinavian actress playing Hamlet, and there was,

* In 1920, Asta Nielsen enacting the role of the heroine-hero. In all fairness to that production, however, it should be added that (unless memory is playing tricks) there was no pretense that it was Shakespeare's story which was being presented.

Before this film and Mr. Olivier's, there were a number of cinema versions of *Hamlet*, none of which we have been able to see. Messrs. Mander and Mitchenson's delightful photographic record, *Hamlet through the Ages* (London, 1952), is running over with all kinds of entertaining facts on past productions of the play; and to it we are indebted for many of the following facts (pp. 2, 3, 8, 24, 33, 37, 52, and 65). Among the film versions were:

indeed, something quite Wagnerian about the affair; as Hamlet fell in death and all her lovely hair tumbled loose and revealed itself for the first time, one was reminded of that incomparable moment at the opera when Siegfried, having pierced through the Magic Fire, undoes the corselet from the sleeping form of the well-padded Valkyrie, beholds her capacious bosom, and staggers back, crying (quite superfluously): "This is no man!"

(On the other hand, one writer stoutly maintains that Hamlet ought always be portrayed as wearing a beard.¹⁹⁶)

1. In 1900, a French filming of the last scene in the play, with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role.

2. In 1907, a French filming of the Ghost scenes in Act One.

3. In 1908, an Italian version of the same.

4. In 1910, a French film of the entire story, with Jacques Grétilat as Hamlet.

5. In 1910, the first English film.

6. In 1911, a Danish film, with Alwin Neuff as Hamlet.

7. In 1913, an English film, starring Forbes Robertson.

8. In 1914, an American film, with James Young as Hamlet, and Clara Kimball Young as Ophelia.

Sarah Bernhardt is, of course, still remembered for her impersonation of Hamlet, but she was by no means the first actress to undertake the role. Mrs. Siddons was apparently the first female Hamlet (1777), and the novelist-actress, Mrs. Inchbald, soon followed her lead (1780); neither of these ladies, however, chanced a London performance. The first time that city saw a female Hamlet was in 1796, when Mrs. Powell enacted the role; New York first saw the attempt in 1819, when Mrs. Bartley made it. Among many other female Hamlets, there have been Charlotte Cushman (1851), Alice Marriott (1861), Mrs. Bandmann-Palmer (1895), Clara Howard (1899), Eva Le Gallienne (1937), and Esmé Beringer (1938).

There have been other strange *Hamlets*. There was a celebrated *Dog Hamlet* in the early nineteenth century, in which a gifted dog followed Hamlet around throughout the course of the play, and in the last scene pinned Claudius to the floor while Hamlet killed the King.

In the pages of the present study, references to the "film version" of *Hamlet* are, of course, to Mr. Olivier's only. That is likely to be the only one with which readers have any acquaintance, and it is, moreover, bound to be on view for some time to come.

There are other accounts of the procrastination. At complete odds with Schlegel and Coleridge's too-thoughtful Prince, George Santayana finds Hamlet totally irrational: "He acts without reflection, as he reflects without acting. At the basis of all his ingenuity . . . lies this act of inexplicable folly: that he conceals his discovery, postpones his vengeance before questioning its propriety, and descends with no motive to a grotesque and pitiful piece of dissimulation."¹⁹⁷ Professor Lewis thinks Hamlet's delay the fruit of his pretended madness.¹⁹⁸ A recent writer conceives the hero as more devoted to rant than to action.¹⁹⁹ Another thinks Hamlet's inaction owing to his inability to understand himself.²⁰⁰

The "To be or not to be" soliloquy has caused many commentators to emphasize the Prince's concern over death. Doctor Jones sees Hamlet's struggle as "at heart one long despairing fight against suicide."²⁰¹ Mr. Masefield, too, believes that he prefers death to action.²⁰² But Mr. John Middleton Murry makes Hamlet's *fear* of death the mainspring of the plot: "'To be or not to be' verily is the question." The Ghost has implanted "in Hamlet's soul that utterly new horror of death which will for a time prevent him from taking revenge." Shakespeare has Hamlet put off vengeance for two reasons: his fear of that "something after death" of which the Prince speaks, and the Christian ethics which bids him "resist no evil." But it is the former which "is the main dramatic motive of delay."²⁰³

It has also been suggested that the reason we cannot decipher the causes of Hamlet's inaction is that they keep changing throughout the play. "The causes of Hamlet's long delay are complex; the center of gravity, so to speak, shifts from act to act, from scene to scene. New complications arise." Shakespeare preferred "we should decide for ourselves" what the leading motives may be, so that we may have a deeper sense of the complexity of all human emotions.²⁰⁴ But elsewhere this vagueness of intent is felt to be a fault: the hero having no ostensible reason for postponing vengeance, the dramatist attempts to cover up the weakness of his plot by Hamlet's frequent self-reproaches.²⁰⁵ It is also held that the delay was meant to be a puzzle,²⁰⁶ a mystery.²⁰⁷

The Prince is described as "the most complete failure" on record.²⁰⁸ He inherits his "weakness, his self-abandonment" from his

mother, his "foolhardy courage" from his father; and his "passion for crooked ways" and his love of "intriguing" from his uncle.²⁰⁹

He is a fatalist, crippled in action by the conflicts of his personality—his trust and distrust of logic, his emotional make-up, and his affectionateness.²¹⁰ He is "the philosopher, who realized that life was not worth having," for it is basely gross, fit only to be rejected by the noble of soul.²¹¹ Yet Mr. Madariaga has depicted him as "ego-centric"—a man of "Borgian mind" with "utter disregard" for the feelings of others—a man who believes all things "permissible to the powerful for the sake of power."²¹²

Hamlet is "the apotheosis of the Fool," according to the dramatist's depiction of that vocation.²¹³ He is also the typical esthete and a warning "illustration of how such imbeciles fare," when faced with practical duty; he is "morally contemptible" like all esthetes—heartless to Ophelia (whom he is eager to corrupt), to his friends, and to Polonius.²¹⁴

The trouble with Hamlet is that he doesn't know his Bible intimately enough; such men are doomed to failure.²¹⁵ He is an eleventh-century Catholic prince who might have been saved and successful had he consulted a "spiritual adviser."²¹⁶ He is a typical product of Renaissance learning as dispensed at the University of Wittenberg, and rendered by it unable to deal with the world; his fellow student Horatio suffers from the same incapacity.²¹⁷ His conflicts are the product of the *Kultur* of the Elizabethan age.²¹⁸

Nor have Hamlet's physical disabilities been overlooked. He ails from a fatty degeneration of the heart, and he procrastinates because of his "too too solid flesh."²¹⁹ He is "a fat neurasthenic, half evil, half imbecile."²²⁰ So judge an American and an Italian; but a more charitable Frenchman, while granting his excess weight, is sure it did not harm him in any way.²²¹

Hamlet was no melancholy Romantic, but "first and last and always the gentleman," who learned to control his passions.²²² He was also a confirmed celibate.²²³ He was a constable; for that is what his name means, and Shakespeare uses the word symbolically.²²⁴ He was, in addition, probably a Hindu; for his conviction that to exist is to suffer is clearly drawn from the *Bhagavadgita*.²²⁵

While we are on the subject of the character of Hamlet, we

should take note of some of the commentators who, without reference to the question of his procrastination, discover Shakespeare himself in his hero.

To a certain extent every creator, even so detached a writer as Shakespeare, inevitably puts something of himself into his creation—even when, unlike Byron or Keats, he has no taste for writing autobiographically. To write well he must identify himself with his characters, each in turn, and see what they do and say from their point of view. No one has ever managed this process more perfectly than Shakespeare. And M. Courdaveaux, after dismissing various theories concerning Hamlet's make-up, has Shakespeare very reasonably describe the manner of Hamlet's conception: "To what end do you argue in this fashion and impute to me depths of thought I never possessed? It may be I am a great poet and an admirable arranger of stories for the theater, but I was never the profound philosopher you paint me. . . . As for the topic which so much concerns you, I found in the *Tales of Belleforest* a story which struck me as being dramatic, and I tried to use it in the theater, as I have done with countless others . . . Instead of the wild half-sorcerer the legend supplied, I began making out of Hamlet a gentleman of my own day, the flower of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers, with all the intellectual culture of the sixteenth century. Then, by a process familiar enough to poets, I gave to this intelligent man, refined by education, sentiments I myself acquired by nature and events. Suffering from men and events, I have used the situation of my hero to put into his mouth the vexations and disillusionments of my own heart." ²²⁶

But not all have been content with so moderate and reasonable an approach to the world's most completely objective writer. Taine insists that "Hamlet is Shakespeare," and that in the hero "Shakespeare has painted himself." ²²⁷ So, too, feels Mr. Figgis. ²²⁸ One critic says that Hamlet is "a full-length portrait of Shakespeare's mind"; ²²⁹ another, of his inner self; ²³⁰ yet others, of Shakespeare in his everyday life, ²³¹ of his own nature, ²³² of his own misfortunes. ²³³ (The last commentator also adds, as if to square accounts, that Shakespeare is not only the author of his own plays but of the works attributed to Bacon as well.) Hamlet is what Shakespeare "might have been if he had not written the play"—it was his sublimation of the "super-ego and the impulses of the id." ²³⁴ Doctor Jones goes, of

course, much further, and in a long chapter psychoanalyzes "The Hamlet in Shakespeare" via the play, finding in it abundant proof, backed by the *Sonnets*, of the dramatist's bisexuality.²³⁵

Allied to the search for the autobiographical in Shakespeare's work is the modern pastime of discovering portraits of his contemporaries in the play. Although a harmless enough sport, it strikes us as of all occupations the most futile. Even if any of these findings could be accepted, they can contribute nothing of literary import; they cannot by an iota elucidate the plays as drama, as poetry, as comedy, or as tragedy. It is perfectly true that Shakespeare frequently makes reference to contemporary events; that was because he conceived himself to be a modern writing about modern (or rather, eternal) values, rather than historical ones, no matter where or when his locale; the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker, moreover, who were his audience, would have a livelier sense of the reality of the play's transactions if it were peppered with references familiar to all of them. It is also true that every creator naturally draws upon his observation and knowledge of the people around him. But all that constitutes something quite different from the supposition that he who created not for an age but for all time should have found it worth the trouble to give us full-length portraits of this or that Elizabethan courtier. In any case, even had he taken that trouble, it could hardly matter to us now when we approach *Hamlet*. Whatever value the tragedy has for us has nothing to do with the lives of Essex, Leicester, or James VI of Scotland.

Like Mr. W. H. of the *Sonnets*, Hamlet has been identified both with Southampton²³⁶ and Pembroke.²³⁷ Because of the Essex rebellion and the fall of Elizabeth's last favorite, many have found in the Prince a portrait and defense of him²³⁸—though, confusingly, some make an analogy between Laertes' storming of Claudius' palace (in which Hamlet had no hand) and Essex's abortive attempt to do the same to Elizabeth's. One writer also concludes that Claudius is Leicester;²³⁹ another believes the whole work a memorial to the ill-fated Essex;²⁴⁰ another, a combined tribute to Essex and Marlowe with some self-portraiture superimposed.²⁴¹ Hamlet has also been thought a portrait of James I by a considerable number of scholars;²⁴² one commentator adds that Gertrude is Mary Stuart; Claudius, Bothwell; and Ophelia, Anna Douglas;²⁴³ another very ingeniously reasons in

this fashion: Hamlet calls Claudius a "pajock" (peacock), i.e., Jacob, i.e., James—Hamlet is "hambled," i.e., "the lamed one"—Laertes is "leo(lion)-heart"—Ophelia is "Mephisto-ophelia."²⁴⁴ Hamlet has also been identified with Bacon (who is, naturally, the author of this and all of the other Shakespearean plays), Horatio with Shakespeare, and Fortinbras with James.²⁴⁵ *

Hamlet has, finally, been called the typical Jew, a portrait of "a people bleeding from the heart at the injuries inflicted by the wickedness of the world."²⁴⁶

For the sake of completeness we must include at least one specimen from the so-called "Marxist" critics. These guileless folk have a simple time of it; according to them, until very recent days "progressive" writers have forever been demonstrating the fall of the feudal order and the rise of the middle class. (Why anyone should lift a pen to reiterate the demonstration none of them explains.) We know of one lecturer on *Hamlet* who describes Hamlet's indecision as a symbol of the decaying feudal order and Fortinbras' purposefulness as a symbol of the rising middle class. (Ophelia is "feudal lyricism"—which "is pretty but I don't know what it means.") He considers it beside the point that Fortinbras, whom he makes to represent the leading concept of the play, appears (in one of the longest plays ever written for the stage) for about five minutes *in toto*.

It is a simple exercise, as we have said. To indulge in it, you do not have to bother reading the books you discuss: any digest of the World's Best Books will satisfy your needs. For in any story someone is likely to be going up, and he will be the middle class, and someone going down—you've guessed it!—he is the decaying feudal order.

Mr. Morrow thus eloquently places Shakespeare in the vanguard

* In R. C. Churchill's fascinating study of "the attempts which have been made to prove that Shakespeare's works were written by others," *Shakespeare and His Betters* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1959)—and these others include Bacon, Raleigh, Essex, Cecil, Burton, Southampton, Shirley, Derby, Rutland, Barnard, Devonshire, Stirling, Oxford, Florio, Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth, and various "groups" of the forementioned!—we read how Hamlet has been claimed as a portrait of Raleigh (pp. 72, 106); Burton (p. 77); Bacon (p. 77); Derby (pp. 106, 182); Rutland (pp. 91, 106); Oxford (p. 106). Mr. Churchill demolishes all this nonsense very ably (pp. 121-223).

of social progress: "It was the middle class, then, whose advance meant the advance of civilization. . . . It fought, however selfish its aims, against all that stood in the way of expansion, all the impeding powers of the feudal world. . . . When all is said of Shakespeare the fact remains that in expressing this class he belonged with the movement forward."²⁴⁷ It is to be hoped that Mr. Granville Hicks will blush at the words he once wrote as preface to this criticism: "Bourgeois critics"—lovely phrase!—"Bourgeois critics, schooled in doctrines of the sanctity of art, talk about the irrelevance of Marxism to literature. . . . Most critics seem unaware that the stirring events of Queen Elizabeth's reign constituted a crucial episode in the conflict between capitalism and feudalism. Certainly they do not perceive the effect that this struggle—a class struggle—had on Shakespeare's choice of themes, and they will be shocked to discover that . . . he was, in his treatment of his themes, unmistakably a partisan."²⁴⁸ Mr. Morrow acknowledges that Mr. Hicks' "stimulating comments have done much to give . . . what merit" his work has.²⁴⁹ Ah, the fatality of rushing into print, the permanence of the printed word!

SOME SENSE AT LAST

There remains a small group of *Hamlet* critics whom we may call the "objective" school because they look for the reasons of Hamlet's delay not in his personal shortcomings but in the circumstances of the story itself.

They all share one very serious defect: they attempt to account for Hamlet's fall entirely in terms of the situation in which the hero finds himself, and thus they unwittingly rob the drama of any claims to authentic tragedy; their Hamlet becomes only a victim of arbitrary Fate, a man without the necessary tragic *hamartia*, and consequently not a tragic hero. (In fact, one of our leading Shakespearean scholars, partial to this school, but forgetting first principles, has declared: "If *Hamlet* is not a tragedy of external circumstance there never was one."²⁵⁰ To which one is obliged sadly to reply, "There never was.")

But this school of "objective" *Hamlet* scholars has done the play the great service, unfortunately insufficiently heeded these days, of drawing attention to the actual material of the drama, from which

the "subjective" interpretations have wandered too far afield, pre-occupied (as they are) with trying to understand Character without reference to the Plot. There is no aspect of tragedy upon which Aristotle more insists than the basic nature of Plot. Literature being an imitation of life, "the primary objects of artistic imitation are human beings in action, men performing or doing something"; for Aristotle the distinguishing trait of drama is that it "directly presents the actions of men." Hence, Plot takes precedence even over Character in tragedy, "for tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action." Plot is the organization of the action, and hence characterization must accommodate the Plot, not Plot the characterization. The "objective" critics have the virtue of keeping their eyes on matters connected with the Plot of *Hamlet*. If we cannot accept their comments as satisfactorily complete because they sin in the opposite direction and tend to overlook Character altogether and the relation of the tragic flaw to the catastrophe, we are nevertheless indebted to them for stressing certain factors in the story which must not be dismissed.

F. W. Ziegler, a celebrated actor, was the first to note an important element in the play. Hamlet plans to give the piece before the King in the hopes that Claudius' guilt will become publicly evident. "If the King's occulted guilt unkennel itself, Hamlet's sword must be plunged in the murderer's heart. If the royal bodyguards do not instantly cut him down, which is to be expected, he will certainly have to justify the assassination of the King before a legally constituted court." And all Hamlet then could bring in as evidence would be the corroboration of Horatio and Marcellus that they had seen a ghost.²⁵¹ Such testimony would hardly exonerate Hamlet from what must appear a case of clear regicide—if the attending court allowed him to live long enough to have a trial.

This is an observation that makes sense. It reminds us that although *we* believe Claudius guilty of the murder of Hamlet's father, none of the persons of the drama besides the murderer (and possibly one other being) even suspects that there has been a murder. The rest of Denmark, including—be it said at once—the Queen, believes that the late monarch died a natural death, and has no reason to believe otherwise. These facts we ought to bear in mind throughout the play.

Another fact of equal importance we are likely to overlook. In our times, when the only surviving European dynasties are political figureheads, we are inclined to think of kings as we do of other human beings. Though elevated in position, they no longer inspire the terror that was theirs when they were held to possess "divine right." In the seventeenth century regicide was more than a matter of killing another man; it was a sacrilegious act—as England later discovered when, after its legally constituted Parliament voted the execution of Charles I, Europe rocked with horror at what it deemed a deed of blasphemy. To recapture the sense of the divinity which did hedge a king, one has only to read one of the finest of Stuart dramas, *The Maid's Tragedy*, written by Shakespeare's gifted fellow playwrights, Beaumont and Fletcher. This play contains at least one scene of such dramatic intensity as would be enough to make the fortunes of any play today—did it not also contain a twist of plot, perfect for its times but unacceptable to ours, which would mar the entire tragedy for a modern audience. The hero, a brave warrior, is married by the King, quite beyond his expectations, to the most ravishingly beautiful woman at court; to wed her, he abandons his betrothed. After the wedding ceremony he discovers upon the very first night that his bride will never sleep with him: the marriage, which the world believes his reward, is but a ruse to cover her secret love affair with the King, and to provide a father for the King's illegitimate children when they are born. *We* should expect him to rush with his sword to exterminate the treacherous monarch. But our hero is a contemporary of Shakespeare's. What does he therefore do? He indeed rushes to the monarch with his sword, but only to kneel before him and to plead that his betrayer slay *him*, exclaiming:

As you are mere man
I dare as easily kill you for this deed
As you dare think to do it. But there is
Divinity about you that strikes dead
My rising passions; as you are my king,
I fall before you, and present my sword,
To cut mine own flesh, if it be your will.²⁵²

This, as reflected in many plays, is the light in which Shakespeare's fellow citizens saw kings. And the proof of it is in *Hamlet*,

too. In the final scene, even after Laertes has revealed to the whole court that Claudius is to blame for both the poisoned cup which has killed Gertrude and for the plot which enabled the naked blade to deal Hamlet his mortal hurt, when Hamlet thereupon flings himself at the King to stab him, the court reacts, as it were, by conditioned reflex:

ALL. Treason! Treason!
V, ii, 320

They would have had that reaction to the killing of their King no matter what Laertes had just exposed.

In assessing Hamlet's problem of vengeance, then, we must begin by taking into account the almost insuperable difficulty facing the Prince when he attempts, singlehanded, the life of a king. This Shakespeare's audience would have understood as too obvious to require underlining. We are likely, however, to be unaware of it.

The German critic Klein advances us another step in the realization of the fundamentals of the plot: "The tragic root of this deepest of all tragedies is secret guilt. . . . Here the brother in sleep, far from all witnesses or the possible knowledge of any one, is stolen upon and murdered. And how murdered? . . . Murder most secret, murder, as it were, in its most primitive shape, murder invisibly committed; . . . a thief-like murder, such as they only commit who steal a crown. The victim himself is all unconscious. . . . For this deed of blood there is no human eye, no human ear. The horror of this crime is its security; the horror of this murder is that it murders discovery. . . . The son has no other certainty of the unwitnessed murder than the suspicion generated by his ardent filial love, the prophecy of his bleeding heart, 'O my prophetic soul!' *—no other conviction but the inner psychological conviction of his acute mind; no other power of proving it but that which results from the strength

* This is a serious slip. When Hamlet exclaims these words after the Ghost identifies the murderer, it is absurd to interpret them as meaning that he has always suspected his uncle of the crime. Up to this interview with his father's spirit, Hamlet has had no idea that his father died an unnatural death. The line means merely that he feels now his old hatred of his uncle has a real basis.

of his strong, horror-struck understanding. . . . Vengeance is impossible, for its aim hovers in an ideal sphere. It falters, it shrinks back from itself, and it must do so, for it lacks the sure basis, the tangible hilt; it lacks what alone can justify it before God and the world, material proof." 253

That this commentary is on the right track—as far as it goes—is obvious once we remember that *Shakespeare took the pains to change the original version of the story*, as we have noted, so as to *make the murder of Hamlet's father not an open act of assassination*, publicly committed and therefore known to the world, *but secret, hidden from everyone's knowledge*, apparently impossible to bring charges against. The change, as we have also already remarked, is such as to alter the whole meaning of the story. It is urgent that we remember that Shakespeare's plot is constructed on the premise of *secret murder*.

It was Karl Werder who most significantly elaborated Klein's position. He reminds us that Hamlet's task involves more than stealing upon Claudius and killing him. "To a tragical revenge there is necessary punishment, to punishment justice, and to justice the vindication of it before the world. And therefore, Hamlet's aim is not the crown, nor is it his first duty to kill the King; but his task is justly to punish the murderer of his father, unassailable as that murderer is in the eye of the world, and to satisfy the Danes of the righteousness of this procedure. . . ."

We interrupt the quotation to reinforce this cardinal point. The Ghost's only injunction to Hamlet concerning the taking of vengeance against Claudius is:

But howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind

I, v, 84-85

—which, lowered into prose, means something like this: "But in whatever way you carry out this act of vengeance against Claudius, be careful that you manage it without injuring your soul": in other words, "be sure that your deed be an act of justice, not murder." In *Hamlet* itself, as we shall see, we behold the differences between an act of private reprisal or spite (such as Laertes is anxious to perpetrate) and an act of justice (such as Hamlet is enjoined and wishes to

perform). They have nothing in common. An act of justice must be one that the world, knowing the facts of the case, can understand as such.

That Hamlet is mightily concerned, when he has at last killed Claudius, that what he has done be correctly understood by Denmark, his world, as justly done, is eloquently demonstrated during the last minutes of the play. He has, after Laertes' death, but three brief speeches allotted him while the venom is working its mortal way in his blood, and these last utterances of his are largely given over to his anguished desire that everything be explained. In the first of them he addresses the astonished court:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant Death
Is strict in his arrest— O, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
Thou liv'st. *Report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.*

V, ii, 345 seq.

It is his paramount thought as he is dying. Now Horatio attempts to follow him in death, but he dashes the poisoned cup from his faithful friend's hand, and he has but one reason for doing it:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while
And in this harsh world *draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.*

V, ii, 355 seq.

And with his last breath, a few moments later, still troubled with the importance that the world understand his acts, he says:

{ So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,
Which have solicited—
[i.e., *Tell Fortinbras all the happenings which
have incited—*]

V, ii, 368-9

He was about to add "my acts" but life fails him. He has only four words more: "The rest is silence," and with them he dies. The catastrophe is complete: Hamlet meets death without knowing whether what he has done will ever be understood. And the critics, on the whole, have seen to it that it should not.

Let us return to Werder. He is speaking of the earlier part of the tragedy: "But it is the difficulty of producing this evidence (i.e., against Claudius), this proof, the apparent impossibility of convicting the guilty person, that constitutes the cardinal point in *Hamlet*! And therefore killing the King *before* the proof is adduced would be, not killing the guilty, but killing the *proof*; it would be, not the murder of the criminal, but the murder of Justice! It would be truth that would be struck dead, through such an annihilation of its only means of triumph; the tragic action would degenerate into the action of mere brutes; a strange, outrageous, brutal blow across the clear eyes of the understanding would be this senseless stroke—for which the critics are so importunate!" * 254

Werder's view, while it does not furnish a thorough understanding of the drama and fails to account for much that happens in it, is essentially healthy and corrective of much nonsense written about *Hamlet*. It affords an intelligent point of departure for examining the progress of the action, by affirming fundamentals that would have surely been deemed obvious enough by early audiences unencumbered by the weight (since Mackenzie) of more than a century and a half of commentary. Although not sufficiently respected for its undercurrent of good sense (perhaps because all German criticism has been rendered suspect by a prevailing heavy-handedness and mysticism), Werder's theory has been endorsed by a number of respectable scholars.²⁵⁵ The limitation of his criticism is that, despite

* Thus much, discounting a certain Teutonic floridity, Werder speaks to the point. But a great deal of what follows in Werder is not so good. As we have noted, the argument fails to make Hamlet a tragic hero by keeping him a victim; Werder, like Klein, must be pronounced inadequate in some of his conceptions, in many details of his exegesis, and in his concept of Hamlet's character. Some of his lacks are due to his readiness to take for granted Hamlet's feigned insanity. He has a hard time of it relating that to the plot, and proving it natural and essential to the story.

sound premises, it avoids keeping a fresh, unprejudiced eye on the actual events which form the plot.

THE PLOT'S THE THING? NO, THE SOLILOQUY!

In the next two chapters, where, respectively, we answer the confusion-makers and then outline the play as we believe Shakespeare understood it, we shall keep our bearings by never losing sight of the Plot. At this late date one would think it axiomatic that in drama worthy of the name, it is plot which "is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; character holds second place." ²⁵⁶

Nevertheless, despite this unexceptionable observation of Aristotle's, Professor Stoll, who has founded something of a school of his own in Shakespearean criticism these past decades, declares: "We have no right . . . to interpret the character by way of the plot." ²⁵⁷ Mr. Johnson, who calls Professor Stoll "the most considerable critic of Shakespeare since Bradley," says of him that he has undertaken "to re-establish the integrity of the work of art . . . and to define the primary meanings of the play in terms of the time and place of their composition and production." ²⁵⁸

Of the latter procedure we have already said that although it is indispensable it is full of hazards too. Shakespeare was in every quality and understanding immeasurably beyond his fellow Elizabethans. While much in his plays can be illuminated by an understanding of Elizabethan manners and beliefs, in and out of the theater, it is always dangerous stubbornly to insist that Shakespeare was never more than just another dramatist of the age. The bromide that "all writers cannot help reflecting their age" is true enough—but only to a degree. The great writer has ever been one who is better than his age; his greatness, indeed, is always in direct proportion to his having outdistanced the notions of his contemporaries. Professor Stoll, by never seeing Shakespeare as more than an Elizabethan, ends by diminishing him to the size of his smallest fellow playwright and audience.

As for the former attribution, it strikes us as a careless description of Professor Stoll to say that he tries "to re-establish the integrity of the work of art." It is a fact that Professor Stoll has always seen, as one should see, the dramas as plays written for the stage, not

only for the library; but he seems unwilling to view Shakespeare's masterpieces as more than highly successful popular entertainment. And between art and mere entertainment—particularly in the instance of tragedy—the gaps are very considerable. Professor Stoll sees little more in *Hamlet* than a clever and not-too-well-thought-out rewriting of an old play. "Prompted by his usual opportunism," Shakespeare, he feels, turned "to account" the popular traditions of the revenge play.²⁵⁹ The audience was familiar with "feigned madness as an artifice and a natural employment of the revenger," not only in the old play on *Hamlet*, but in other revenge plays as well. He therefore "passed lightly, carrying his audience with him, over the reasons for it."²⁶⁰ Shakespeare simply "kept Hamlet as he found him, only manipulating him more deftly. The audience were accustomed to the revenger beating about the bush but reproaching himself for it."²⁶¹ Hamlet's delay, in short, is only due to the Elizabethan convention of the revenge play, hence cannot be related to any defect of the hero's character or situation, and need not be questioned by us. The inference is that since Shakespeare had five acts to fill up, Hamlet could not take his revenge until the last scene, or the play would be over too soon. (Professor Spencer, on the other hand, remarks on *Hamlet's* extraordinary length, and observes ruefully: "Nearly all of Shakespeare's plays have proved too long for the endurance of most audiences. . . . Why Shakespeare, who almost lived in the theater, habitually wrote in excess of its requirements is a pretty question."²⁶² Even if the reproach were just, it would show Shakespeare as something more than a conformer to Elizabethan standards!) To keep the audience interested, according to Professor Stoll, Shakespeare used the soliloquies as a stop gap until the revenge should take place at the end; the soliloquies are, therefore, a vital part of the play's narrative.

We are thus asked to think of the soliloquies, which by nature are not action but only speech, as basic to the story. Tragedy in this way becomes not a representation of life, of men in action, but a species of oratory. Such an idea makes of the dramatist a mere patcher of monologue and dialogue, a disguiser of inadequate plot material! Professor Stoll in his anxiety to restore Shakespeare to the Elizabethan stage also exiles him from the company of the world's greatest creators, where people infinitely less informed than Professor

Stoll know he belongs. It is *not* true that Shakespeare "kept Hamlet as he found him." When Shakespeare altered the elder Hamlet's murder to a secret one, he changed everything in the story's base, and was bound therefore to change everything accordingly in the hero's character and conduct. To deny him the intelligence of understanding that much about his profession is to make of him a bungler or Professor Stoll's successful opportunist. If he had been merely an opportunist he need have changed nothing in his source. He obviously had his reasons for making so vital an innovation in the story's premise; he obviously intended to write a quite different dramatic study from that afforded by the traditional Hamlet plot. And change that plot he did—in many significant ways. On that plot we had better keep our eye. Character *is* to be understood in terms of plot (Professor Stoll will forgive my preferring Aristotle's authority in this cardinal matter to his)—except, of course, in the work of a bungler or a cheap entertainer. What is the value of scholarship's familiarizing itself with the old Hamlet story if it is never willing to ask the meaning of Shakespeare's divergences from it? Would anyone dare assert that Shakespeare kept *any* of his great tragic figures "as he found him"? What has his Othello in common with the original Moor who commissioned the ensign to beat Desdemona to death with a sandbag, and then proceeded to help his officer pull down the ceiling over her to make her death seem an accident? What has his Lear in common with the mildly pathetic Lear of the old play, or Macbeth with the Scot of the chronicles? And yet from none of their sources did he make so basic a deviation as in the case of *Hamlet*.

Moreover, if Hamlet does procrastinate, it is inevitable that we should ask why, and not be content to answer that Elizabethan revengers generally delayed. To accept so prosaic a reply is to forget that tragedy is an imitation of the actions of men as we know men to be. One can only sympathize with Professor Stoll's desire to banish the vapid kind of Shakespeare-idolatry which owns no wish to understand what it adores, with his will to put an end to irrelevant sentimentalizing over the plays; one values the impulse which causes him to keep his attention on the *Hamlet* that was intended by its author to be acted on the boards. But *Hamlet* has always been more than engaging theatrical entertainment. We must never forget that it is a play or that it was the work of an Elizabethan; but we must

also not divorce it from universal human experience, which all great tragedy mirrors. *Hamlet* was certainly the creation of a man who knew his theater; but that man was also the world's greatest dramatist and the world's greatest poet. And when he composed *Hamlet* he composed a great tragedy.

HAMLET, THE PLAY

Unluckily, it has often been other than that to commentators. Voltaire, steeped in neoclassical taste, found it "vulgar, barbarous," and was sure it would be deemed "intolerable by the lowest populace of France or Italy," for despite some "sublime passages," its plot is utterly revolting.²⁶³ (Those populaces continue to prove his prediction wrong.) To a German it is an unintelligible work because of the superfluity of its incidents and the inconsistencies of its characters.²⁶⁴ Halliwell-Phillipps came to despair of "meeting with any theories that will reconcile its perplexing inconsistencies."²⁶⁵ (He might have done better to forget the theories and let the play speak for itself!) Papini thought most of the drama incoherent.²⁶⁶ Mr. Robertson has always stressed the failure of *Hamlet* as a work of art,²⁶⁷ and has insisted that Shakespeare must be viewed as "first and last an adapter . . . of other men's plays," finding this truism to be nowhere "more obvious than in *Hamlet*."²⁶⁸ Another scholar, of like mind, ascribes Shakespeare's failure to his having continually changed his intentions during the course of *Hamlet's* composition.²⁶⁹

What many of the critics think of the work as a whole has already been revealed by the quotations we have made from them. There are other scattered pronouncements: *Hamlet* is a tragedy not of excessive thought but of "defeated thought," a herald of the modern illness of uncertainty;²⁷⁰ it is a study of the contradiction between appearance and reality;²⁷¹ it is a tragedy only because of the numerous corpses accumulating during its action, for to Shakespeare tragedy meant violent death.²⁷²

Finally, there are those unhappy, and hopelessly inartistic, commentators who look only for symbolical, allegorical meanings in a work of art. To one of them the whole play is a symbol, and "every character is besteepled in deepest fumes of foul concoction from the nethermost hells of human life."²⁷³ To another, Hamlet stands for

Little Faith; Horatio (Ho-ratio) for Reason, Claudius for Natural Understanding, Polonius for Memory, Laertes for Learning, Francisco for Peace, and Bernardo for Desire.²⁷⁴ *Hamlet* is represented as an allegory on three modern types of men: the one who thinks too much (Hamlet), the one who thinks too little (Laertes), and the ideal combination of thinker and man of action (Fortinbras).²⁷⁵ Again, Hamlet is Spiritual Aspiration, Gertrude Emotion and Desire, Claudius Worldly Reason, Hamlet's father Intuition, Horatio Mistrust, Ophelia Experience, Polonius Worldly Wisdom * and Laertes Vanity.²⁷⁶ More ingenious: the letter "h" being an aspirate, it stands for the "breath" of life; it is significant that only Hamlet, Horatio, and Ophelia have that letter in their names, for they are the only characters in the play that stand for life; Ophelia (*ope* plus *helios*) is Sunshine; Hamlet (*H* plus *am* plus *let*—*H* is the breath of life, *am* is the verb *to be*, *let* is *to hinder*—put them all together and they spell—no, *not* "mother," but)—Humanity Hindered.²⁷⁷ Again, Hamlet figures allegorically as Truth, the court as Falsehood;²⁷⁸ or Hamlet and Horatio both represent the New Philosophy as taught in the dramatist's day at Cambridge.²⁷⁹ *Hamlet*, though its author was unaware of it, is a perfect solar myth.²⁸⁰ Once more Ho-ratio is Reason, but this time Francisco is FRANCIS baCOB, the author of the play;²⁸¹ on the other hand, Shakespeare's having performed the role of the Ghost for his company proves that he was a ghost writer for Bacon.²⁸²

The play is a defense of Roman Catholicism²⁸³ and an attack on the new Protestant faith, Hamlet's father being the old religion; Gertrude, England wedded to the new corrupt Protestantism (Claudius); and Hamlet, the youth of England torn between loyalties to both.²⁸⁴ It is also a revolt *against* Roman Catholicism,²⁸⁵ the "Marxist" view being likewise that Shakespeare was "hostile to the Catholic Church and the English feudal class allied with it."²⁸⁶ That *Hamlet* was a pure expression of the Protestant Revolt is thus elaborately exposed by a German scholar: the Ghost is the Spirit of Christ, Ho-ratio (again!) is Melanchthon-Reason, Hamlet is Lutheranism,† Claudius the Papacy, Laertes Erasmus, and the Poles are the

* !!

† Why, in England?

Devil defeated by both Hamlet's father and Fortinbras; England is now free to establish the new religion.²⁸⁷

When, in the next chapter, we bring our answers to the analyses cited of Hamlet's character and conduct, we shall be pardoned if we do not notice these allegorical idiocies. *Hamlet* has nothing to do with this rubbish. It does not hanker after mystical meanings. It is only one of the world's greatest tragedies, taking its place beside its creator's tragic masterpieces. It is also his most ambitious and brilliant intellectual undertaking, the most brilliant in the history of dramatic literature.

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O NIGHT, WHICH EVER ART WHEN DAY IS NOT!

O NIGHT, O NIGHT! ALACK, ALACK, ALACK!

A Midsummer Night's Dream, V, i

THIS COLD NIGHT WILL TURN US ALL TO FOOLS AND MADMEN.

King Lear, III, iv

THE DEEP OF NIGHT IS CREPT UPON OUR TALK.

Julius Caesar, IV, iii

WHY, HERE WALK I IN THE BLACK BROW OF NIGHT

TO FIND YOU OUT.

King John, V, vi

THE CLOAK OF NIGHT BEING PLUCKED FROM OFF THEIR
BACKS,

STAND BARE AND NAKED. . . .

Richard II, III, ii

IV *The Cloak of Night Plucked Off: Reason and the Critics*

IN EVERY PLAY there are things said, things thought, and things done. Of these the most important are the things done. ("The primary objects of artistic imitation are human beings in action, men performing or doing something."—Aristotle)¹ Other forms of literary composition may simply narrate or describe the actions of men; it is in the direct presentation of these actions that drama is distinguished from the novel, the short story, narrative poetry, and the essay. The very word *drama* comes from the Greek verb *dran*, *to do* or *to act*. Hence, to understand a play we must focus our attention

primarily on the things done during the course of the plot. Things thought and said must be interpreted according to the light thrown upon them by the action of the play.

Further, in a drama of even the feeblest psychological insight our interpretation of the things said is subject to what is actually being thought. Not to be too arbitrary, we may affirm that our comprehension of a play begins with the transactions of the plot; with them in mind we pierce through the words spoken to what the characters are actually thinking, for without the action we should not know how to understand the words. For instance, when Iago says to Othello: "My lord, you know I love you" (III, iii, 117), we are not to interpret the words on their face value, we are not to believe that Iago's bosom overflows with welling affection for Othello or to prepare ourselves for deeds of kindness and generosity. Rather, since this is a play, we first recollect that Iago is at the moment busy destroying Othello (the action), and next realize (since this is a play of psychological depth) that he speaks these words only because he is gloating over his growing success in winning power over the Moor. Thus, when we analyze a drama, we must first place emphasis on the thing being done, next, the thing being thought, and—in view of these—last, the thing being said. In our daily living, could we always manage to gauge people with the same precedence we should be living with perfect discretion.

Unhappily, a vast bulk of Shakespearean commentary is nullified by the predilection of scholars to base their theories on things said. They take a passage out of context with the action, and build upon a single passage (sometimes a single line or two) their interpretation of the whole play, and then squeeze the entire work into the theory, no matter how bad the fit. These Procrustean habits require lopping off entire sections of the action; if any given scene proves inconvenient to the theory it is ignored as if it were not there.

A good example is the widespread view of Antony (in *Julius Caesar*) as a beautiful unselfish character, a view which completely leaves out of account his scene with Octavius and Lepidus (IV, i), wherein all three are revealed as cold-blooded politicians who think of Rome only as a pawn in the game of personal power. Begin and end your understanding of Antony with his "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech (III, ii), and you have your heroic Antony of pop-

ular conception, the invention of generations of schoolma'ams. But in the scene of the meeting of the triumvirate, shortly after, Antony figures as an unprincipled scoundrel: first we see him coldly appointing who is to be butchered and who not, and agreeing out of policy to the death of his own nephew; then, as soon as Lepidus quits the room, we observe him losing not a minute in urging Octavius to agree to the liquidation of Lepidus too:

This is a slight unmeritable man,
Meet to be sent on errands. Is it fit,
The threefold world divided, he should stand
One of the three to share it?

IV, i, 12 seq.

Octavius reminds Antony that he has agreed to Lepidus as one of the three to share the rule of the world; Antony replies that his agreement was merely political expediency: Lepidus is needed for a while as one needs an ass to help bear burdens, but

having brought our treasure where we will,
Then take we down his load and turn him off,
Like to the empty ass, to shake his ears . . .

Cynicism cannot go further, and it is part of Antony's portrait. Now, if this scene disturbs your notions of him, just pretend that it isn't in the play. Or, if you are of the temper of some intransigent but subtle-minded commentators, read that scene with your preconceptions, not for what the action reveals, but with the purpose of forcing the lines to accommodate your theory of Antony. On the other hand, you can choose to begin your study of his character at the beginning of the play, and watch well his relationship to the other persons of the drama; this will give you the man Shakespeare created, and you will find him a creature whose moral constitution you would hardly hold up as an exemplar for your son.

Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most misunderstood characters, has been distorted out of all proportion by this Building on Quotations. Isolate the "Many a time and oft" and the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" passages (I, iii, 107 and III, i, 61) from their proper places and you are ready to come forth with, what Shakespeare never intended, a noble defense of the Jews and a Shylock who is the "tragic

representative" of his race. On the other hand, fasten on Gratiano's slurs during the trial scene (IV, i, 364; 379; 398) and you have what was even further from Shakespeare's purpose, a denunciation of the Jews and a Shylock portrayed in a spirit of such anti-Semitism as periodically moves some rabbi to demand the play's total suppression. But if you are interested in Shakespeare's intentions, you will prefer to take Shylock from the moment you first meet him, judge him and everyone else by what they do, and follow through the play; at the end you will have a Shylock completely different from either of these, and a Shylock, moreover, of quality and import.

Of all of Shakespeare's works none, of course, has suffered more than *Hamlet* from this old sport of Building on Quotations. Goethe, we have seen, erected upon an unimportant couplet his sentimental notion of a too-delicate hero; Schlegel upon an equally inconsequential remark his too-thoughtful Hamlet. (These lines, "The time is out of joint . . ." and "There is nothing either good or bad . . .," are unimportant and inconsequential not in the intellectual but in the *dramatic* sense. Consider when, where, and to whom they are addressed and they have no bearing, you will see, on the plot's development, and hence very little on the character's.) Choosing, hit or miss, a passage enables one to prove almost anything about a Shakespeare play.*

* Shall we? Very good! Ladies and gentlemen, we herewith present you with the evidence that *Hamlet* is concerned with the one matter thus far overlooked, the Irish Question, which in Shakespeare's day was very much a *burning* one. (See Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*, urging the "reducinge that salvage nacion to better gouernment and cyvillitie.") Our proof is based not on one quotation but two. (This should really, to follow tradition, be put in an appendix; appendices are as popular with Shakespearean scholars as they are in operating rooms of hospitals.)

After seeing the Ghost, Hamlet answers Horatio's "There's no offense, my Lord," with

Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio!

I, v, 136

—calling to witness not an English or a Danish saint (*are* there any Danish saints?) but *the patron saint of Ireland!* As we have seen, some scholars maintain that *Hamlet* espouses the Catholic cause—dangerously unpopu-

If we are to understand *Hamlet* we must be patient in our anxiety to understand its hero. We must take the advice of the King in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*: "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop."² Few critics bother to do any of these three things. The beginning of the consideration of any good play

lar in our dramatist's day—but it is now clear that they have not been bold enough in their speculations. Here we see Hamlet *secretly* espousing the Irish cause, most dangerous cause of all. Now we can better interpret that "prison house" where Hamlet's father is "doomed for a certain term . . ."—that abode a description of which "would harrow up" one's soul (I, v, 10-16). Obviously, Hamlet's father is living in exile in Ireland—his situation curiously similar to that of Dean Swift, as apt quotation could quickly demonstrate, who described that land in even less complimentary language.

We do not know, of course, what Hamlet privately proceeds to do after this revealing outburst, for Shakespeare keeps it a secret too, thus adding to the dimension of his play (see page 71, above); he wishes it to be a mystery. (Let those who would construe that as a defect remember how *Finnegan's Wake*—Irish too!—gains by being a *little* mysterious.) At any rate, whatever Hamlet's shenanigans (an Irish word? Does not "hugger-mugger" of IV, v, 84 have a Gaelic ring too?) may be, he has developed so close an understanding with Ireland's guardian that not long after, when he finds Claudius praying, he addresses the saint in accents the most intimate:

Now might I do it, Pat!

III, iii, 73

as he whips out his sword. The nickname indicates that he is by this time on terms of greatest familiarity with Saint Patrick, who, with an Irish sense of fun, it may be assumed, will not take umbrage.

It is true the last quotation would require two slight changes in typography—one comma and one capital. The line is usually printed "Now might I do it pat." But such trifling alterations are nothing to Shakespearean scholarship. Many of the reputed would consider such tamperings as beneath notice, they themselves not having hesitated to change the very words (which we have not offered to do) or their traditional meanings, or even the plot itself (as by gratuitous interpolation of stage directions), etc. And as for modifying punctuation—!

This "Irish theory," but sketchily presented here, will soon receive the attention it merits. Correspondence informs us that the world may

must be a consideration of its plot. No idea is more underlined in *The Poetics* than this one.* Naturally, when a good play is in progress we are as much interested in the characters as in the plot, and in some plays more so. But it is only within the mold of a strong plot that character can sustain interest, for in drama it is through action that character must reveal itself. "Dramatic action," says Aristotle, "is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the action."³ It is significant that he particularly praises *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the outstanding instance of the subordination of character to plot; this is the one play most admired by the world among the Greek tragedies for its powerful characterization! And he was right, of course. In no play is the hero's character revealed more progressively as the action progresses; you will find that you could not cut from the play one speech without jeopardizing the entire structure.

anticipate three monographs elaborating the argument: *Noch Eine "Hamlet"* by Herr N. D. B. Reinaberg; *Hamletje* by Professor B. N. D. Ebirgenär; and a work by Dr. Granrieeb of the Punjabi University (we regret that we cannot decipher *his* title). We are also warned that the indefatigable Monsieur B. D. N. Baniergré will issue his "*Hamlet*" *et la Liberté irlandaise* not distantly; in it he threatens to demolish the argument. No doubt he will simply make it an occasion for advancing, as usual, the case for the Bourbon pretender to the French crown.

* And none is more sadly in need of revival today. Contemporary drama is largely indifferent to plot. In the United States, where theater has been far more stimulating during the last few decades than in England, the situation is all the more vexing. It is true that Mr. Anderson and Mr. Williams have restored to the English-speaking stage a poetry which has been long exiled from it, and that some of their fellows have recovered a healthy contact with the realities of experience. But illogical or mangled plots remain the vogue. The justified success of plays like *The Member of the Wedding* are in despite of their feebleness of construction. Miss McCullers' play was infused with authentic poetry, but in her brilliant novel of the same name she had the materials for a very fine, possibly a great, play, had she taken pains to create a plot. Plays with a sound plot are becoming so rare that a leading New York critic seriously suggests that plot may be an outmoded requirement in drama. When the drama no longer requires plot, paintings will no longer require color or sculptures shape.

When, therefore, in the next chapter, we present Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as we believe its author intended it to be understood, we shall begin with the plot. In the present one, we must use the same procedure in answering the leading theories already noticed. We must make our frame of reference what actually happens in the play.* If the dramatic action is at variance with a theory, that is enough to nullify the theory. And any theory which cannot be illustrated by reference to the plot must be branded irrelevant.

HAMLET ALWAYS SANE

On the question of Hamlet's sanity we can be brief. Hamlet is not insane, *nor does he ever pretend to be insane*. You will remember Samuel Johnson's astutely observing that the Prince does nothing in the play which he could not have done without the reputation of insanity. That is truer than the Great Lexicographer realized. Shakespeare nowhere shows Hamlet pretending lunacy.

Maintaining this, we are in a difficult position. The normal proceeding when the question of anyone's sanity is raised is to prove not the sanity but the insanity. Everyone is presumed to be acting sanely unless he can be shown to be acting otherwise. No one is called upon to prove that he is sane; it is only on evidence of abnormal behavior that he is to be thought not sane. In the case of Hamlet what we must insist upon, in all fairness, is the rejection of the legend that he assumes the role of a madman, a legend foisted upon him by commentaries; we must become freshly acquainted with him as Shakespeare conceived him. As normal human beings we must assume that he too is normal and is behaving normally, unless he gives evidence of behaving otherwise. He will be found acting not once in a way to arouse our suspicions.

At this point the reader is no more asked to accept in advance that Hamlet's conduct is that of a perfectly sane man than to adopt any other of the views we have quoted. He is asked only to observe

* Mr. William Bliss in his *The Real Shakespeare: a Counterblast to Commentators*, a zestful work no lover of Shakespeare should ignore, devotes a chapter of boundless good sense to a refutation of Mr. J. Dover Wilson which he ironically entitles "What Does Not Happen in Hamlet." * *hah! hah!*

Hamlet carefully. If, remembering performances or prejudiced readings of *Hamlet*, he finds it impossible to image Hamlet as a hero always behaving sanely, he is requested to be patient until, in our later discussion, he comes upon the scene (or scenes) causing him concern. He must not at this juncture indulge in the game of Building on Quotations by asking, "How about the time Hamlet says—?" If he will wait until we reach that moment, he is likely to find that the question will already have answered itself. Our chief problem, in the meantime, is to maintain order. At the present all that is asked is his assent to this reasonable proposition: If Hamlet can nowhere be shown to be conducting himself like a madman, he must be accounted as neither mad nor pretending to be mad.

The reader must also turn deaf ears to all those weighty commentaries which irrationally insist that because the old Hamlet story contained a hero who feigned insanity to protect his life, Shakespeare necessarily caused his hero to do the same—even though in our play, for more than half of its duration, Hamlet's life is in no danger. It is amazing that those scholars who have seen that Shakespeare's hero has not the reason of the old Hamlet for assuming madness have never asked themselves where in Shakespeare's play he does so. To have asked that question would have been to put literary sources to some use. Shakespeare was no cobbler of old shoes. He did *not* keep Hamlet "as he found him." Having removed the need for the pretended madness, he was capable of removing the pretended madness too. Once he determined to make the murder of Hamlet's father a secret one, he engaged to tell an essentially new story. Certain elements of the old plot, it is true, he did retain. It is characteristic of his methods that he should have kept what he could employ to advantage—not because, as the scholars vow, he was lazy, but because retaining from an old plot what he could for a new story presented an interesting challenge. (He stood in the same relation to his source as did the Athenian dramatists to the familiar stories of their legendry, retaining what was useful and altering what must be changed in accordance with the play's conception.) This meeting of challenges constitutes one of the chief pleasures of creation; every creator is, in a manner of speaking, a runner in a one-man obstacle race: he deliberately selects and places the hurdles to be overcome, and is exhilarated in overcoming them. The challenge is

one of the great incentives to creation, as every creator knows. Shakespeare, it is true, did earn a good livelihood from his craft; but the scholars are foolish to deduce from that fact that he was exclusively concerned with supplying a market. They forget that he was also a sublime artist, and an artist creates for the fun of it too.

Now, the notion of Hamlet's feigning insanity has, as we have remarked, been rooted in one particular passage:

so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself—
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on—
That you, at such time seeing me, never shall
note
That you know aught of me,—this not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
Swear.

I, v, 169 seq.

"To put an antic disposition on" is generally assumed to mean, loosely, "to behave like a madman." Before we re-examine its meaning, let us agree: if nowhere we see Shakespeare causing Hamlet to conduct himself like a madman, we must insist that no actor has Shakespeare's authority to make him behave like one, when no moment of the action calls for lunatic behavior.

(If one wished to be sophistical, in academic tradition, and did not wish to re-examine the language of this passage—as we shall do in a few moments—one could say, noting that Hamlet nowhere does play the madman, that when Shakespeare had reached thus far in the composition of his play—the last scene of the First Act, where the passage occurs—he still thought he might use the feigned madness of the old Hamlet story, but then changed his mind. If that were the case—and it is not—there would still be no justification for interpreting the role as that of a man assuming insanity, since the action that follows exhibits no instance of his behaving that way. Suppose that the old Hamlet story told of a hero who decided to protect himself against his uncle by speaking only Greek thereafter, and suppose that Shakespeare's hero in the first act announced that henceforth in company he would speak only Greek. If thereafter the au-

dience never heard the hero utter a word of that mellifluous tongue, the announcement would have to be dismissed as an impulse later reconsidered and never executed.*)

Before looking more closely at the crucial passage, let us recreate the circumstances in which the words are uttered. Hamlet has been alone with the Ghost. The Ghost has revealed the fact that Hamlet's father did not die a natural death, as everyone has believed, but was murdered by his own brother Claudius, who had first seduced the Queen to adultery. The Queen has not been accused by the Ghost as an accomplice in the murder, and henceforth among Hamlet's mental tortures will be his uncertainty of the full extent of her guilt. The Ghost has laid upon Hamlet two behests: in avenging his father's murder Hamlet is enjoined,

{ . . . howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught . . .

I, v, 84-86

—i.e., manage your vengeance so that you do not jeopardize your own spiritual health—work an act of justice, not another murder—and spare the faithless Queen. The Ghost has made no stipulations as to how or when this vengeance is to be executed. With the approach of morning the Ghost has disappeared.

Surely, anyone who has seen Mr. Gielgud's performance can never forget how superb he was in the remainder of this scene: it was acting of sheer genius, and right in every detail. Here only, if anywhere in the tragedy, is Hamlet near nervous collapse:

{ Hold, my heart,
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up!

He staggers about, clapping his head between his hands as though the beating inside it would deprive him of his reason ("in this distracted globe"). To most men the narrative of the Ghost might have indeed proved too much: to hear that solemn voice from beyond the grave, the voice of a deeply loved father—to learn of the sufferings of that

* Mr. Olivier's cinema version avoided the issue altogether by omitting the entire passage.

spirit's endurance of the flames of Purgatory (I, v, 10-21) and the gloom of the night it is condemned to stalk—to hear of his mother's adultery, of his father's murder, of his hated uncle's criminality—to have the burden of vengeance thrust upon him—all this, without preparation, laid upon him suddenly—and to have the horrible tale cap the bitterness in which his father's death and mother's hasty marriage have already plunged him—even the mightiest of men might have been undone by such a stroke. But not Hamlet. Small wonder, however, that he reels; the world, whose foundations trembled at his father's death and began to shake at his mother's marriage to his hated uncle, has just tumbled about his ears.

But he is given no time for ordered reflection; before his whirling thoughts have spent themselves—in a mere twenty lines—Horatio and Marcellus are upon him. He has not even had time to recover some degree of self-control.

Only Mr. Gielgud has understood how ill-prepared Hamlet is at this moment to speak to anyone. He is bursting with what he has been told, and the lines prove that he is on the verge of disclosing everything:

- | | | |
|-------------|--|-------------------------|
| MAR. | How is 't, my noble lord? | |
| HOR. | | What news, my lord? |
| HAM. | O, wonderful! | |
| HOR. | Good, my lord, tell it. | |
| HAM. | | No, you'll reveal it. |
| HOR. | Not I, my lord, by heaven. | |
| MAR. | | Nor I, my lord. |
| HAM. | How say you, then, would heart of man
once think it?— | |
| | But you'll be secret? | |
| HOR. & MAR. | | Ay, by heaven, my lord. |
| HAM. | There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Den-
mark— | |

He's about to add, "like my uncle." Characteristically, Hamlet, who has not had opportunity for one minute's consideration of his enormous task, is on the point of ruining everything. Human, all too human, he rushes to the comfort of sharing the burden of what he has heard. But, characteristically too, just in time he stops the torrent of his words. Mr. Gielgud conveyed all this marvelously: at the

end of the last line quoted, he suddenly ceased, looked in dazed bewilderment at both men, clapped a hand over his mouth to dam the current, and staggered away almost drunkenly, while muttering

But he's an arrant knave.

Words—anything to finish the sentence which he has nearly terminated by a revelation that could have proved fatal to his cause. Before he dare confide, he must have leisure to get his bearings. Surely, this is precisely what Shakespeare intended.*

Horatio, not remotely guessing what Hamlet has learned, is a little offended at the latter's suddenly breaking off his confidence. But Hamlet, perceiving the error so nearly committed, is evasive: he has his business, they theirs; he wishes to be left to his. Then, because gracious by nature, he sees that he is hurting his best friend by shutting the door against affection; he apologizes for his strange words:

I'm sorry they offend you, heartily;
Yes, faith, heartily.

The repetition indicates the sincerity of his regret at being unable to tell his friend more as yet. *L'amitié ferme les yeux* and Horatio at once reassures him:

There's no offence, my lord.

Hamlet, a trifle calmer, contrives to atone to Marcellus too for the sudden interruption of his confidences. He can vouch that this is "an honest ghost"; but he must pray them both not to inquire further into his dealings with it:

* Nevertheless, it is not so generally understood. Kittredge describes the passage as showing Hamlet speaking "flippantly of the Ghost and its errand."⁵ Adams finds these words to be "so much nonsense."⁶ Wilson thinks them a parrying of the men's "natural curiosity by a piece of 'wonderful' news which tells them nothing."⁷ John Barrymore's interpretation, wonderful in many places, was annoyingly consistent with such views; he took each of the men around the shoulder, led them up to the footlights, assumed a very conspiratorial air with "But you'll be secret?," played up the suspense of what he was about to say, and delivered "But he's an arrant knave," as though it were all a great joke, and moved off in handsome profile with an airy wave of his hand. It was all very amusing, very flip—and rather revolting.

For your desire to know what is between us,
O'ermaster 't as you may.

And, having so nearly made a mistake himself, he pledges them to silence on what they have witnessed. Marcellus takes umbrage at being asked to swear on oath on the sword:

We have sworn, my lord, already.

But Hamlet will not be denied, and insists. Unheard by the other two, the Ghost's voice echoes "Swear!" from underground; and Hamlet, still shaken, shifts his place to banish the sound from his still trembling ears. (It is not five minutes since the Ghost departed.) Horatio deems Hamlet's behavior "strange" only because he himself does not hear the ghostly voice.

At last the oath is proposed: They are never, no matter how incredibly Hamlet seems to be behaving—since hereafter he may find it necessary to act in a way that will seem odd—to fold their arms in an attitude implying private knowledge of him, or shake their heads sagely, or give out some doubtful phrase implying that they could say more if they chose to:

so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself—
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on—
That you, at such time seeing me, never shall
With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As "Well, we know," or "We could, an if we would,"
Or "If we list to speak," or "There be, an if they might,"
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me,—this not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
Swear.

And the two men take the oath.

Hamlet does not imply by

As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on

that he may hereafter decide to play the madman—though universally that is the accepted meaning of these words.* The reasons against such an interpretation are more than one, and all cogent. And it is the better to gauge them that we have therefore been at pains to re-create the moment of drama in which the words are spoken.

¶ It is psychologically inconceivable that Hamlet could have decided upon so unusual and important a plan as playing the madman, when he has not had a moment's leisure to think of any line of future conduct. As we have seen, the entry of Horatio and Marcellus found him still whirling from his converse with the Ghost. The effort merely to check himself from revealing what the Ghost has imparted has consumed all his attention up to this point of the dialogue. He cannot humanly be thought capable of conceiving such an elaborate scheme in the maelstrom of his violent emotions during these few minutes.

¶ ~~We do not see or hear Hamlet talking like a madman there-
after.~~

¶ Hamlet performs nothing and learns nothing during the course of the rest of the play as a consequence of assumed madness.

¶ The idea of assumed madness is dependent upon the meaning of the word "antic," in "To put an antic disposition on." Despite the universal misconstruction of this passage, the word "antic" has never meant "crazy" or "lunatic." The *Oxford English Dictionary* no-

* Kittredge: "A clear allusion to his purpose of counterfeiting madness."⁸ But that device "adopted on the spur of the moment" proves "unsuccessful."⁹ Adams: "He plans to act the madman."¹⁰ Why? "We can only guess. His task seemed to call for a stratagem of some kind." But Hamlet fails "to use it to accomplish the great deed."¹¹

Wilson: "Hamlet assumes madness because he cannot help it. . . . He is conscious that he no longer retains perfect control over himself. What more natural than that he should conceal his nervous breakdown behind a mask which would enable him to let himself go when the fit is upon him?"¹² This pretended madness "is the very salt of his (Shakespeare's) play . . . Imagine *Hamlet* without it, and most of the wit together with all the fun . . . would be lost."¹³ (Why should wit and a sense of humor which are not masquerading as lunacy be less engaging?)

where lists such a meaning. These are the definitions of the word there given, as employed up to the date of the composition of our play:

a. "*Arch. and Decorative Art.* Grotesque, in composition or shape; grouped or figured with fantastic incongruity; bizarre."

b. "Absurd from fantastic incongruity; grotesque, bizarre, uncouthly ludicrous." The first two illustrations listed under this usage are from Marlowe's *Edward II*: "My men like satyrs . . . shall dance the antic hay," and our passage from *Hamlet*. Hamlet, according to this definition, is saying no more than that he may find it necessary to behave in a way that will hereafter perhaps appear absurd, ludicrous, bizarre, grotesque—none of which meanings figures as madness.

c. "Having the features grotesquely distorted like 'antics' in architecture; grinning."

As a noun "antic" is next defined (d., e., and f.) as grotesque representations in the arts; and

g. "A grotesque or ludicrous gesture, posture, or trick; also fig. of behavior. (Commonly in *pl.*)."

h. "A grotesque pageant or theatrical representation."

i. "A grotesque or motley company."

j. "A performer who plays a grotesque or ludicrous part, a clown, mountebank, or merry-andrew."

As a verb the word is defined:

k. "To make antic or grotesque."

l. "To perform antics, act as an antic."

Vol. I, pp. 365-66

It will be seen that the common denominator in all these meanings is "grotesque." Remembering Shakespeare's willingness to use one part of speech as another, we must still conclude after considering all the definitions that the only possibilities among them for his use of the word in this crucial passage are to be found in *b*, *c*, *g*, and *j*. None of these implies even remotely the notion of insanity.

We have gone thus remorselessly into the matter to make it clear that although actors continue to project a Hamlet feigning madness, in so doing they impose a meaning upon the tragedy that is not in it. It is true that Polonius starts a rumor that Hamlet is mad, but there is no warrant to take the cue from that old fool. Others

refer to Hamlet as a soldier; an actor might therefore with as much justice take a fancy never to enter upon the stage without dragging along a piece of cannon. (Hamlet, unquestionably, has been a soldier; but we do not see him operating in that profession during the course of the play.) Or the actor might, to be completely original, prefer always to come on stage leading behind him on a leash a pet kangaroo. There is nothing in the play to suggest the cannon or the kangaroo, but there is nothing prohibiting their introduction—except intelligence. Exactly the same can be said for introducing feigned insanity.

These considerations do not, however, banish one important aspect of the plot. After Polonius comes to his absurd conclusion, some of the persons of the drama *do* speak of Hamlet as mad. Polonius is sure Hamlet is deranged, Ophelia is made to think so, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are informed so, the Queen chooses to accept the rumor, and the King (who knows better and would give much if it could be proved that Hamlet is mad) pretends to think so.*

Why is Polonius' notion that Hamlet is mad taken up generally by the court? When first we meet the Prince he is friendless and unhappy, grief-stricken over his father's death; and fairly disgusted with everyone about him because of the speed with which his mother has remarried, the incestuous nature of that marriage, the readiness of the court to condone it, his dislike of his uncle, and the ease with which his valiant father has been forgotten. Then at the end of the first act he has his volcanic experience with the Ghost, hearing for the first time that his father has been murdered and who the murderer (according to the spirit) is, and being pledged to vengeance. That interview, in addition to conveying the shattering information and laying upon him the heaviest of obligations, also raises questions concerning the extent of his mother's culpability and the meaning of the interview itself. After it, it is understandable that the most normal and convivial of men might seem something less than cheerful, less than affable to the court which gives its support to the new king. Remember that no one except the murderer (and, as we shall see, possibly one other) knows that there has been a murder, that no one

* Wilson's Claudius is sure that Hamlet's derangement is "genuine enough." ¹⁴ Wilson's proof? Claudius *says* so to others.

except Horatio and Marcellus (to neither of whom does it occur that he is mad) knows that he has had dealings with the Ghost. Denmark is satisfied with the reigning monarchs, and, like the rest of the world, prefers to have things agreeable. Hamlet's ungraciousness to the King and sarcasms to his mother and general unfriendliness will strike everyone as very shocking, odd, and unreasonable—everyone, that is, except Claudius, whose tortured conscience troubles him when Hamlet rejects his friendly overtures. In self-interest Claudius is obliged to encourage the general verdict that Hamlet's behavior is abnormal—is glad to do it. It leaves him the freer from any possible connection with it. And so Hamlet's reputation for being "transformed" grows, even while Claudius' inner fear is that his nephew may be all too sane.

In such an environment, alone (but for Horatio's understanding) in his knowledge of what the Ghost has revealed, of what he himself must find out, and of what he must manage to do, Hamlet has only to behave as any normal human being would behave in his circumstances to convince a Denmark, unaware and unconcerned, that he is queer. Who of us, if it were whispered abroad that we are not of sound mind, would not seem to furnish proof the livelong day to prejudiced observers uninformed of our problems, that we are indeed mentally unbalanced?

The point was shrewdly made in a Broadway hit of some years back, *The Shrike*. The hero of that melodrama, despairing of ever being rid of a vicious wife so that he can marry the girl he loves, has attempted to commit suicide. He no sooner recovers in the hospital than he sees the folly of his act, and is ready to come to grips with his many problems. But his wife, who would rather see him committed for life than free to go out into the world and have a decent life without her, manages the hospital staff so ably that he is soon under suspicion of being mentally unsound. Through her efforts he is put "under observation." After all, he is informed, "the doctors take most cases of suicide to be an inverted homicidal tendency. Do you know what that means? . . . You're a potential murderer in their eyes."¹⁵ He is given the same kind of idiotic test that Polonius administers to Hamlet to try his sanity ("Do you know me, my lord?"—II ii 173): What is the capital of France? When did Roosevelt die? Subtract from a hundred by sevens.¹⁶ Indignant at this

stupidity, he is almost too revolted to answer, and vents his annoyance. But that tells against him. Knowing himself in his wife's clutches, he reacts as any normal human being would, with alternate anger and irony, his attempts at being calm varying with the sense of the hopelessness of his situation. He is in the desperate position of having to prove that he is not abnormal before the doctors will release him. Finally, in exasperation, when the psychiatrist has been convinced that this patient has been behaving rather too explosively, the trapped husband cries out to his wife in a burst of justified fury: "You've got to hold on tight to keep your balance here, Ann. Everything you say and do is reported. You are constantly watched. I shouldn't be getting excited now. If I'm seen, it will set me back God knows how long. You can't have normal human feelings here, Ann. Only continuous calm. Is that normal—for anyone?"¹⁷

It is exactly in the same kind of exasperation that Hamlet, who has heard a little too much of his supposed madness and now perceives that his mother excuses her own lechery by construing his home truths as lunacy, cries out to her:

Ecstasy!*

My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music. It is not madness
That I have uttered. Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will re-word, which madness
Would gambol from. Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks.

III, iv, 139 seq.

But up till then, except for several sardonic thrusts, he makes no attempt to convince those who think him mad that he is sane. How would he, how would anybody in his situation, go about proving his sanity? Is he to rattle off problems in arithmetic, relate facts of history, ask for an examination? The more he would protest his sanity, the more everyone would become convinced that he had lost it. Such indeed is his mother's reaction to the deeply earnest and eloquent speech we have just quoted! Besides, he is indifferent to their opinion; they are no friends of his. If they wish to think him

* i.e., madness.

mad, let them. It gives him more privacy, which is what he wants. But there is no place in the play where he makes the slightest effort to *confirm* them in their opinion of his madness—unless one be so dehumanized as thus to interpret his two ironic passages with the old fool Polonius. It would be too hard if one could not allow Hamlet, who has a magnificent sense of humor, to pull the leg of the dotard who is completely confident that the Prince is mad, and whose own brain is so vacuous.

Hamlet, then, behaves throughout with perfect sanity. We cannot interpret his indifference to other people's opinion of his conduct as a feigning of insanity.

HAMLET AND THE GHOST

Approaching the larger question of Hamlet's procrastination, we had better begin by understanding what part in the plot is allotted the Ghost. The revelations and behests of the Ghost inaugurate the first significant advance of the play's action. Upon them the plot firmly rests. If we fail to understand precisely the import of Hamlet's interview with the Ghost we cannot correctly understand his subsequent conduct.

In our salad days, when *Hamlet* was still a puzzle to us, we found ourselves particularly disturbed in our attempts to comprehend this specter. The spirit of Hamlet's father seemed to us to be discussed, by the characters who behold him, in language strangely unsuited to the late Majesty of Denmark. More than that, we felt thwarted by what appeared a major confusion: in the first scene Horatio and Marcellus decide to make their report to Hamlet with the express object of inciting the Prince to join them on the platform so that he may converse with the Ghost, whom they have both beheld—

HOR. Let us impart what we have seen tonight
Unto young Hamlet, for upon my life,
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.
I, i, 169 seq.;

yet in the fourth scene they restrain him by main force when he wishes to follow the Ghost for just that very purpose—

MAR. But do not go with it.

HOR. No, by no means . . .

MAR. You shall not go, my lord.

HAM. Hold off your hand!

HOR. Be ruled. You shall not go.

I, iv, 62 seq.

Indeed, Hamlet is compelled to hurl them off so that he may do what they have brought him out into the night to accomplish. It was obvious that we did not know enough about Elizabethan ghosts.

It happened that at the time we were indulging a new enthusiasm which we had caught like a rash from that indefatigable collector of vampires, demons, and witches, Montague Summers, the author of *Demonology and Witchcraft*, *The Geography of Witchcraft*, *The Vampire*, *The Vampire in Europe*, and other fascinating studies. Living in the twentieth century, Mr. Summers, partly because of his wide reading and partly for reasons of temperament, came to believe devoutly in the reality of the Devil and a whole tribe of minor demons who spend their time decoying humanity into error; further, he became firmly convinced that to deny the existence of these devils is to deny the tenets of Christianity. He is deliciously exciting to read (no less in his choice polyglot footnotes than in his text)—a completely medieval intelligence operating, with a vast store of learning, in the midst of a modern scientific world. He, for instance, with all due allowances for hoaxes and pretenders, was sure that spiritualists and mediums do receive messages from the spirit world; only he identified the senders of the messages as minor devils busy, as ever, with the destruction of human souls. From the endless treasury of Mr. Summers' histories and examples we began to understand that while the world generally accepted the idea of a personal Devil, it was also generally believed that

the Devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape
II, ii, 628-29

—almost any shape his Satanic Majesty pleases.

In the midst of our necromantic-diabolic readings, we discovered that the Bodley Head Quarto series, edited by Mr. G. B. Har-

rison, had been publishing several volumes of early treatises referred to by Mr. Summers, and we hastened to purchase them. Among these little treasures was the reprint of the *Daemonologie* written by King James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) in 1587. This work of the bigot-king began to educate us in Elizabethan lore concerning ghosts.*

It is clear from the *Daemonologie* that a ghost may be none other than the Devil himself, masquerading for the occasion in the guise of a person familiar to the unfortunate mortal favored with the supernatural visit. James, who probably never once harbored an original idea in his cranium, was voicing accepted notions when he wrote the following passage:

PHI. And will God then permit these wicked spirites to trouble the reste of a dead bodie, before the resurrection thereof? Or if he will so, I thinke it should be of the reprobate onely.

EPI. What more is the reste troubled of a dead bodie,

* As a matter of fact, two enterprising studies of Elizabethan attitudes towards spirits had been made long before,¹⁸ but Shakespearean scholarship had taken no cognizance of them, and we were at the time unaware that in them we might have learned more fully about demonology of the period. Until comparatively recently Professor Stoll was almost unique in having given any thought to the subject, when he insisted that Shakespeare's ghosts must be accepted by us on the same terms as Shakespeare's audience.¹⁹ Since then a very few scholars have studied the subject, chief among them being Professor J. Dover Wilson in an important preface.²⁰ Mr. Wilson's later pages on "Ghost or Devil?" should also be mentioned as perhaps his best contribution in *What Happens in Hamlet*²¹—although we find his exegesis on the Closet Scene extravagant. More recently, Mr. R. H. West has gone thoroughly into pneumatology as exhibited in Elizabethan drama.²² Nevertheless, few scholars now take the Elizabethan view of ghosts into account when discussing *Hamlet*, even though, as Mr. Wilson admirably states it: the Ghost in *Hamlet* "was a revolutionary innovation in the history of dramatic literature . . . The stock apparition of the Elizabethan theatre was a classical puppet, borrowed from Seneca, a kind of Jack-in-the-box, popping up from Tartarus at appropriate moments . . . It is one of Shakespeare's glories that he took the conventional puppet, humanized it, christianized it, and made a figure that his spectators would recognize as real."²³

when the Deuill carries it out of the Graue to serue his turne for a space . . . ? . . . And that the Deuill may vse aswell the ministrie of the bodies of the faithfull in these cases, as of the vn-faithfull, there is no inconvenient; for his haunting with their bodies after they are deade, can no-waies defyle them: in respect of the soules absence. . . . Amongst the Gentiles the Deuill vsed that much . . . to discouer vnto them, the will of the defunct, or what was the way of his slaughter. . . . And to that same effect is it, that he now appears in that maner to some ignorant Christians.²⁴

To an Elizabethan, then, a ghost would stand in suspicion of being not the spirit belonging to the body in which it was clothed, but very possibly a devil that had for the occasion borrowed the use of that body. There are multitudinous proofs that such is the attitude of the characters in *Hamlet* towards the Ghost. Shakespeare was writing about this apparition in the manner that made most sense to his audience, and his very phraseology in all references to it was conditioned by popular belief. This frame of mind of the author accounts for what we had earlier felt to be a style of scant respect to that awesome presence.

Let us observe that phraseology. It is significant that although the Ghost appears dressed and armed in precise resemblance to Hamlet's father, the figure is normally referred to in a depersonalized word, not, as we should expect, in terms which would identify him as the late King. We take some of these expressions in the order in which they arise:

- (I, i) HOR. What, has this *thing* appeared again tonight? (21)
 MAR. Touching *this dreaded sight*, twice seen of us (25)
 if again *this apparition* come (28)
 speak to *it* (29)
 HOR. Tush, tush, 't will not appear. (30)

The Ghost enters.

- MAR. Look, where *it* comes again!
 BERN. *In the same figure*, like the King that's dead.

MAR. Speak to *it*, Horatio.

BERN. Looks *it* not like the King? Mark *it*, Horatio.
(40-43)

BERN. *It* would be spoke to.

MAR. Question *it*, Horatio.

HOR. *What art thou* that *usurp'st* this time of night
Together with *that fair and warlike form*
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march?

MAR. *It* is offended.

BERN. See, *it* stalks away! (45-50)

To modern ears it sounds strange enough that they should all use the neuter in reference to the King's ghost, and even stranger that Horatio, recognizing the form of their late monarch, should ask, "Who art thou?" If we know, however, that to them this may be a devil, all they say is clearly a reflection of their reservations concerning the Ghost's actual nature.

As the men continue talking, they never speak of the spirit as being that of Hamlet's father, but say:

Is *it* not *like* the King? (58)

Our last king

Whose image even but now appeared to us (80-81)

The Ghost re-enters and Horatio addresses it:

Lo, where *it* comes again!

I'll cross *it*, *though it blast me*. Stay, *illusion!* (126-27)

This would be the language of mere rant, if it were not that Horatio is aware he may be speaking to a demon who *could* blast him. He means exactly what he says. For the rest of the scene this kind of language continues.

In the next, when Horatio is reporting his experience to Hamlet, he does not say that he saw the late king, but rather:

(I, ii) A figure like your father (199)

And Hamlet himself, loving his father as he does, none the less says:

Did you not speak to *it*? (214)

When the Prince agrees to join them that night he speaks words that ignorance would again pronounce bombast, but which we must understand as a realistic preparation for a projected encounter with a ghost:

If it assume my noble father's person
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape. (244-45)

Later that night the Ghost appears before Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus; note the language the Prince employs in addressing the spirit; with all his adoration of his father, Hamlet as a rational human being has his reservation about ghosts too:

(I, iv) { Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable . . . (40-42)

Now we can understand why Horatio and Marcellus would prevent Hamlet's following the Ghost when it invites him "to a more removed ground," where they could not be present to protect him. Horatio puts his fears into plain English, which is to be taken literally:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff . . .
And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason . . . ?
(69-73)

In short, this could be the Devil up to his usual mischief, not at all the spirit of Hamlet's noble father. If it wishes to speak, let it speak in the presence of Hamlet's comrades.

But Hamlet does follow the Ghost, and alone. Presently, however, even he feels he has taken enough risks:

(I, v) *Where wilt thou lead me? Speak, I'll go no further.* (1)

The Ghost speaks at last, and it seems to us that the actor interpreting the role could easily give dimension to the problem of the Ghost's identity by accenting the verb in the next line we quote. If it were merely a matter of exterior resemblance, Hamlet surely needs not to be informed who it is that addresses him. After thirty years of

intimate acquaintance, no father appearing before his son remarks, "I am your *father*." But knowing the need of settling the doubts of Hamlet (and Shakespeare's audience), the Ghost reassures Hamlet:

I *am* thy father's spirit. (9)

With any other emphasis the line becomes idiotically superfluous.

After the Ghost disappears and Hamlet is joined by Horatio and Marcellus, he loses no time in informing his friend:

Touching this vision here,
It is an *honest* ghost, that let me tell you. (137-38)

In the interval between this scene and the next time we see Hamlet he has had leisure to think over his situation. Naturally, with all his willingness to believe that it was his father's spirit with whom he has spoken, he owes it to his soul's safety to keep an open mind until he can prove the Ghost's reliability. Knowing nothing about Elizabethan pneumatology, Schlegel interpreted Hamlet's uncertainty as a symptom of irresolution: "He is a hypocrite towards himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of resolution. . . . Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else . . . ; he believes in the ghost of his father when he sees it, and as soon as it has disappeared it appears to him almost in the light of a deception." On the contrary, Hamlet's doubts about the Ghost are a symptom not of weakness, but of *strong-mindedness*, a determination to know exactly where he is going. When he has decided to give the play before Claudius, he means exactly what he says, and his words are again to be taken, not as an excuse, but in their literal meaning:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps . . .
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

II, ii, 627 seq.

Hating Claudius, Hamlet must guard himself against a readiness to believe him guilty. The Ghost may have been an evil spirit, and

therefore one of Hamlet's chief motives in arranging to give the play is to determine whether or not the apparition did house his father's spirit. If Claudius prove unaffected by the performance, the Ghost may be dismissed as a devil indeed.

The play is given with success (to a degree), and at last the all-basic question is settled for Hamlet:

O good Horatio, *I'll take the ghost's word* for a thousand pound.

III, ii, 297

He never raises the question again, and we are here a little past the middle of the tragedy.

Obviously, then, Hamlet's need to decide about the identity of the Ghost forms one of the ground elements of the plot during the first half of the play. And an Elizabethan audience would have quickly understood the justifiability of his doubts, would have understood them to be precisely what he describes them to be. It would never have occurred to anyone in Shakespeare's theater to imagine, as later commentators have done, that Hamlet was merely making excuses to rationalize delay.

The Ghost, therefore, is one of the persons most essential to the plot. Precisely because specters have more or less passed out of the horizons of a post-Darwinian world, are we obliged to rediscover what Shakespeare's audiences would have assumed concerning them. It is our only hope of discovering accurately Shakespeare's meaning. Yet that vital knowledge has been ignored by all but a few scholars. Without it, it is impossible to put ourselves in Hamlet's place. Unhappily, much of the commentary on *Hamlet* is invalidated by all kinds of irrelevant and uninformed speculation about the effect of the Ghost's injunctions upon the hero. Many have interpreted the Ghost as a kind of embodiment of Hamlet's lunacy. Mr. Greg, as we have noted, has argued that the Ghost is but a "figment" of Hamlet's brain, in the teeth of the fact that the apparition has been encountered two nights by Francisco and Bernardo before the drama opens (see I, i, 33), and is twice beheld by Horatio and Marcellus, the second time when Hamlet himself is seeing this "figment."

Having reached this point, we need not trouble to answer Mr.

Greg further. When we dismissed the idea that Hamlet ever behaves irrationally, we were also dismissing the notion of his ever being actually insane or mentally unbalanced. But we should like to enforce a concept already advanced by us. No tragedy can have as a hero a man who is mentally unbalanced—whether he be the lunatic of the medicos, Mr. Greg's victim of hallucinations, Professor Bradley's victim of melancholia, or Mr. Wilson's victim of a nervous breakdown who "cannot help doing" what he does. The whole meaning of tragedy is involved in the personal responsibility of the hero for his fall, and a mentally unbalanced hero is innocent of any responsibility for his acts. Nor can we allow to slip by without protest those commentators like Messrs. Granville-Barker, Van Doren, and Lawrence who are content to think Shakespeare meant his hero to be a riddle and who even discover artistic dimension in such vagueness. To make a virtue out of confusion is not only in violation of the fundamental obligation of the arts to communicate, but it is also in defiance of our need of identifying the tragic flaw of the hero before we can apprehend the meaning of his fall. Without a clear comprehension of the hero's traits, there is no possibility of our participating in the experience for which tragedy is created.

Whatever may be said, therefore, about Hamlet's procrastination, it is now evident that Hamlet's doubts about the Ghost have nothing to do with that question.

HAMLET NOT TOO SENSITIVE, NOT TOO THOUGHTFUL, TO ACT

The simplest way to answer the Coleridge-Schlegel school of *Hamlet* criticism that the Prince is too much the thinker to act, as well as the Goethe school that he is too sensitive to avenge himself, is to take a rapid view of the things which happen in the play itself. Hamlet is, indeed, a thinker, a philosophical man, if you will; but he is not a professional philosopher—not the kind of man whose chief preoccupation in life is to wrangle amiably over abstract speculations on the nature of time, space, and being—the "To be or not to be" soliloquy notwithstanding! He is not, we mean, the Hamlet we are forever seeing on the boards, the great "brain," always making his

entrance with arms folded in profound meditation—the professional thinker wandering about without his nurse.

Let us take a view of what Hamlet actually does in this play. Told of the appearance of a ghost resembling his father, he immediately arranges to join Horatio and Marcellus that very night in the hopes of meeting it too (I, ii). When the Ghost appears, he rejects the fears of his friends, brave men both, is powerful enough to throw off their restraining grasp, and follows the dread apparition, unconcerned about the mischief which may be awaiting him further down the road (I, v). He seizes his first opportunity to test the Ghost's veracity and at the same time to expose Claudius if he be guilty of murder; this opportunity he is quick to recognize when the Players arrive, and he is inspired to try the device of presenting a play at court (II, ii). He manages to present his play without impediment (III, ii). In the Queen's closet, to which he has come to castigate his mother, when Polonius cries out behind the arras, his sword is out and through the cloth in a flash; moreover, the thing he has come to do he continues to do, even with Polonius's corpse in the room (III, iv). His visit with his mother over, he drags off the body of the dead councilor and hides it himself (IV, ii). He greatly admires the courage and enterprise of Fortinbras' going forth with an army to fight merely on a point of honor (IV, iv). In the encounter with the pirate ship, en route to England, Hamlet boards the enemy alone, yet manages to win over the whole crew singlehanded, so that they are willing to take him back to Denmark (IV, vi). (He seems in this episode to be much more of an Errol Flynn kind of hero than the one we usually behold on the stage.) His worst foe, Claudius, implies quite clearly that Hamlet is a brilliant fencer (IV, vii, 103 seq.), and the Prince later leaps at the offer of a match with Laertes, an expert duelist (V, ii, 180 seq.). At Ophelia's grave, he jumps in after her brother and grapples fiercely with him (V, i, 280 seq.). And in the last scene, mortally wounded though he is, he has the prowess to rush at the King, stab him, force the remainder of the poisoned drink down his throat, and—after this mighty expenditure of effort—dash the cup from Horatio's firm hands (V, ii, 333 seq.).

From Ophelia we have learned that he is everywhere respected as a model courtier and soldier (III, i, 158), and at the finale it is a soldier's funeral which Fortinbras orders for him:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, *like a soldier*, to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally.

V, ii, 406 seq.

His reputation and his conduct have surely nothing in common with Goethe's delicate "vase" or Coleridge's ponderer—too sensitive or too thoughtful to act. Indeed, it may be questioned whether or not any man who remained inactive through excessive delicacy or excessive thought was ever occupied in acting to the extent and with the energy exhibited by the hero of this tragedy!

HAMLET NOT TOO MORAL TO ACT

~~Act Hamlet does, in short—and all over the premises.~~ Nor is he in any way impeded by Christian morality, as Ulrici and others have maintained, or by that sense of a divine mission which has more recently been attributed to him. That Hamlet does believe he has an immortal soul is beyond dispute. That he is something of a Christian one must also agree. But just how much of one, must be left to the theologians. It is safe to assume that any divine taking a clear view of Hamlet's conduct and thought will agree that the Prince would never be a candidate for sainthood.

He kills Polonius by error. How grief-stricken is he at his act of mayhem? When the corpse comes tumbling forth, notice Hamlet's repentant tone:

{ Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune.
Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.

III, iv, 31 seq.

And he turns back to continue chiding his mother. At the end of the scene, before he goes out "tugging in Polonius," his delicacy and Christian scrupulousness are once more evident as he says sardonically over the corpse:

{ I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room.
Mother, good night. Indeed this counsellor

Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,
 Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
 Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you.

III, iv, 212 seq.

Motherly affection must indeed be blind to enable Gertrude presently to report to Claudius:

he weeps for what is done.

IV, i, 27.

Later, Hamlet sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death without scrupling for a moment to wonder whether they may not be innocent of any ill towards him. He suspects them, and that is enough for him. Horatio plainly hints that he may have been unjust, but Hamlet tosses aside the reproof:

HOR. So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.

HAM. Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
 They are not near my conscience.

V, ii, 56 seq.

His point of view towards his luckless erstwhile friends is that if their natures were too weak to survive being involved in his affairs, so much the worse for them:

'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
 Between the pass and fell incensed points
 Of mighty opposites.

V, ii, 60 seq.

He never pauses to ask whether they could have avoided being so involved. Not much Christian charity here!

Hamlet has killed Laertes' father, and is concerned about avenging his own, yet he can be so blind as to ask the young man indignantly:

Hear you, sir,
 What is the reason that you use me thus?
 I loved you ever.

V, i, 311 seq.

Hamlet cannot understand why Laertes should feel hostile to his father's assassin!

But the most shocking moment of Hamlet's behavior from a Christian point of view is when he withholds his weapon from killing Claudius when he finds the latter apparently praying, lest so he send him straight to heaven. He will wait until he finds the King

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't,—
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

III, iii, 89 seq.

You must accept Christian dogma to entertain such views, but you are also less than an ideal Christian to entertain them! And it is also a little more than absurd to construe, as some contemporary critics do, a hero who when angered can be as uncharitable as Hamlet into an instrument of God's for cleansing the world!

We do not mean, of course, to imply that, because he is less than a perfect Christian, Hamlet is to be viewed, as some few have viewed him, as morally contemptible. He does not have to be a saint to engage our sympathies. Indeed, it is questionable whether a saint could figure as the hero of a tragedy.

What we have adduced should make short work, too, of a Hamlet delayed by "unexpressed motives," by the operations of his subconscious mind (which phrase covers psychoanalytical commentary), or by his fear of death. An audience can follow a tragedy and participate in it only when the motives and mental processes are clearly demonstrated. As for a fear of death, every one of Hamlet's acts cited in the preceding pages gives the lie to that.

If Hamlet does not procrastinate because of excessive delicacy, thoughtfulness, moral scrupulousness, or involved complexes, and if he is neither mad nor ever feigns to be mad, what were the hero and the tragedy of Shakespeare's creation? We are ready to answer now.

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V *Facts Are Stubborn Things: Shakespeare's "Hamlet"*

WE NOW KNOW what the play and its hero are not, and therefore are well on the way to knowing what they are.

Let us, true to our dramatic principles, begin by examining the fundamental action of the play. What is most basic we italicize.

MURDER WILL SPEAK WITH MOST MIRACULOUS ORGAN: ACT ONE

(i) Horatio hears from Marcellus and Bernardo how an apparition has twice appeared to them; he is skeptical. *Suddenly the Ghost appears, in the perfect likeness of Denmark's late king.* Excitedly, Marcellus bids Horatio speak to it; as a scholar he possesses the vocabulary to address what may be a demon in language that will not offend. *But the Ghost will not answer,* and disappears. When Marcellus asks what can be the reason for the current haste in preparing for war, Horatio explains: the late king, challenged to open combat by the King of Norway, slew him and thus honorably won certain lands; now the latter's son, Fortinbras, is busy collecting an army to win back from Denmark the lands his father lost. Horatio breaks off as the Ghost re-appears, and boldly determines to face it, though it should "blast" him for his courage. In a kind of incantation, he powerfully conjures it to reveal its purposes. But the cock crows

and the apparition vanishes. *Horatio suggests that they at once communicate their experience to Prince Hamlet.*

(ii) Before the convened Danish court, King Claudius expresses his grief—a little too urbanely!—over the recent death of his brother, the late king, and explains his hasty marriage to his brother's wife, Gertrude, as owing to the pressure of state affairs and the consent of the noblemen. He delegates two envoys to deal for him in the Fortinbras affair, and grants Laertes, son of his councilor Polonius, permission to return to France. Then, with elaborate display of affection, he addresses himself to his nephew, now his son, Hamlet, and gently upbraids him for still wearing mourning for his dead father. Claudius urges him to look on him as a father. Hamlet insultingly repulses the offer, ignores the King, and ironically assures his mother that his mourning is more than a matter of black attire and momentary tears. The King expresses his wish that Hamlet not return to the university, but remain at court; he informs the world that Hamlet is sole heir to the throne. Left alone, Hamlet expresses his revulsion at his mother's marriage, only two months after his father's death, to the man Hamlet hates most of all men. Moreover, this particular marriage is the more odious for being incestuous. Now Horatio and Marcellus come in. After welcoming with delight his old schoolfellow and closest friend, Horatio, *the Prince is told of the appearance of the Ghost. Hamlet, very much excited, promises to join them that night in hopes to see the Ghost. Even if it be a devil he will speak to it:*

(If it assume my noble father's person
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape . . .)

Hamlet can hardly wait for nightfall.

(iii) Laertes is about to leave for France; he urges Ophelia to mistrust Hamlet's attentions: it is unlikely that the Prince would think of marrying a commoner. Polonius comes in, and gives his son advice and a farewell blessing. Then he turns to Ophelia and questions her concerning Hamlet's conduct towards her, which he suspects as having dishonorable intentions. He ends by commanding her to cease all further communication with the Prince:

This is for all:

I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,

Have you so slander any moment leisure,
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to 't, I charge you.

Ophelia will obey.

(iv) The next midnight. *Hamlet awaits the Ghost with Horatio and Marcellus. It appears. It is his father's form which confronts Hamlet, but he knows that it may be a demon which he sees. He therefore calls upon the aid of heavenly goodness before addressing it:*

(Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable * shape
That I will speak to thee.

The Ghost silently indicates that Hamlet is to follow it, but Marcellus and Horatio urge him not to accompany it: such apparitions have been said to tempt men to destruction. This spirit might

assume some other horrible form

which could drive its victim into madness. But *Hamlet will not heed*, and begins to go with the Ghost. His friends hold him back by main force, but Hamlet hurls them off:

(By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets † me!)

and follows the Ghost.

(v) Hamlet, having followed the Ghost for some time, avers that he will venture no further. *The spirit identifies himself as Hamlet's father, and reveals his murder at the hands of Claudius, his own brother, who first had seduced the Queen to adultery. Having described the manner of the poisoning, the Ghost lays upon Hamlet the burden of revenging this murder, and makes two injunctions: Hamlet is not to taint his mind in the pursuit of vengeance, and he is not to contrive any punishment for the Queen. The Ghost makes ab-*

* i.e., inviting question.

† i.e., hinders.

solutely no stipulation as to how speedily Hamlet is to achieve vengeance or what method he is to employ: the important thing is that vengeance must be worked in the spirit and manner of justice.

The act ends with this scene, and since Hamlet has just learned of his task, his conduct thus far raises, of course, no question of procrastination.

THE PLAY'S THE THING: ACT TWO

(i) We learn that Laertes has been for a while in Paris. Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to spy on his son and find out how the young man has been conducting himself. Ophelia enters in great perturbation: Hamlet has just forced his way into her room and frightened her by his garb, his silence, his intense study of her face, and his sudden withdrawal. She assures her father that, as he has commanded, she has been refusing to see Hamlet and to hear from him. Polonius concludes from her account that her rejection of the Prince has driven the young man mad, and he intends to report as much to the King.

In the intervening time since the end of Act One, Hamlet has had leisure to confide in Horatio and to think over *his problem*, the chief aspects of which are, *first and foremost, the questionable reliability of the Ghost*, which may have been a demon; *the apparent impossibility*—if the Ghost's word may be taken—*of proving a case against Claudius*, since the murder was secret; *the need of settling the Ghost's authenticity*; and, *if Claudius is indeed a murderer, achieving vengeance*.

(ii) The King has sent for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two old schoolfellows of Hamlet. He tells them that the Prince has been behaving very oddly recently, and beseeches them to discover what is troubling their friend, and to do what they can to revive his spirits. The ambassadors from Norway return with the good news that Fortinbras has been forbidden by his monarch to prosecute the war against Denmark. This business ended, Polonius at great length assures the King and Queen that Hamlet's strange behavior is due to Ophelia's rejection of his love:

I precepts gave her,
That she should lock herself from his resort,

Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.

Which done, she took the fruits of my advice . . .

and as a result Hamlet has declined into a state of madness through frustrated love. Polonius promises to prove his theory if the King will fall in with his scheme: he will contrive a meeting between his daughter and the Prince, while he and the King eavesdrop. Hamlet now comes in; the King and Queen depart. Polonius endeavors to test the extent of Hamlet's "madness," but is himself routed by the exasperated Prince. Hamlet is now joined by Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, whom he at first greets with great joy. Soon he suspects, however, that they are acting as spies for the King, and he begins to treat them with contempt. Glad to clear the air, *they tell him that the company of players must soon arrive in town.* Hamlet is delighted at the prospect of seeing again some of his old actor-friends. The actors enter and are warmly welcomed by him; *he asks them to recite a passage from a play he particularly admires. During the recitation, Hamlet, struck by one of the lines, conceives an important plan.* As the players go out, *he delays their leader and requests a performance at court tomorrow of "The Murder of Gonzago,"* and says that he wishes to insert a few lines in the text. *The actor agrees.* Left alone, *Hamlet reveals that the play he has ordered contains a plot similar to the events outlined by the Ghost. When the play is presented tomorrow night, perhaps the similarity will so work upon Claudius that the King will publicly proclaim his guilt before the court:*

I have heard

That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently *
They have proclaimed their malefactions.

And since the Ghost may have been a demon,

(The spirit that I have seen

May be the devil . . .)

and Hamlet must first be sure of the King's guilt, at the very least the performance will settle once and for all the authenticity of the

* i.e., at once.

Ghost and Claudius' innocence or guilt. This much Hamlet will learn by closely observing the King's reactions to the play. He may also learn something about his incomprehensible mother, and the extent of her guilt.

As the second act concludes, there is still no question of procrastination. Hamlet has seized the very first opportunity that has presented itself for procuring answers to some fundamental questions. Until he knows these answers, he cannot possibly know whether or not he has been misled by the Devil and is to murder an innocent man. He is therefore not chargeable with wasting any time either in the discharge of his filial obligations or in advancing the cause of justice. Also, there has been no occasion for his feigning madness.

EVERY FOOL WILL BE MEDDLING: ACT THREE

(i) The next day. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz admit to the King and Queen that they have failed to determine the cause of Hamlet's distraction. *Polonius extends the Prince's invitation to attend the play tonight, and the King eagerly accepts.* When the others leave, Polonius places Ophelia where Hamlet is bound to meet her, thrusts a prayer book in her hand, and then conceals himself and the King so that they may overhear the encounter. Hamlet enters and delivers his celebrated soliloquy: it is the fear of what lies in wait for us after death that makes us endure the catastrophes of life. He now sees Ophelia, who astonishes him by trying to return his gifts to her with the accusation that he no longer loves her. Unable to believe his ears, he bitterly urges her, while she weeps, to flee the world's corruption and enter a nunnery. Suddenly, Hamlet is aware that they are being overheard. He is now infuriated with her, insults her as a hypocrite, and leaves in a rage. He is absolutely convinced that she is allowing herself to be used as a decoy by his enemies.

The King, emerging with Polonius, is convinced neither of Hamlet's madness nor of his love for Ophelia. Polonius suggests that Gertrude be asked to invite Hamlet's confidences while Polonius listens from a concealed place. The King agrees. *This day is the longest day of the play; it continues through the act and does not end until the fourth scene of Act Four.*

(ii) Later that day. *Hamlet* urges upon the players a natural, convincing performance of their piece, and *engages Horatio to watch the King's reactions carefully so that they may compare notes afterwards*. The court enters, Hamlet taking a place near Ophelia where he can study Claudius well. *The play is offered, first as a brief pantomime, then in dialogue. As it proceeds the Queen is not unduly affected by it; the King is mightily alarmed. But he is a strong man and does not break*, though Hamlet applies himself to make him do so. Noting Claudius' agitation, Polonius dismisses the actors, as the King staggers out, followed by the courtiers. *Hamlet is elated: the Ghost has plainly told the truth:*

(O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound.)

Horatio certifies Hamlet's observation of Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come back to say that the Queen wishes a conference with her son. Hamlet treats them with contempt, and accuses Guildenstern of trying to play upon him as though he were an instrument. Polonius enters to repeat the Queen's summons. After teasing the old man, Hamlet agrees to see his mother at once. Left alone, Hamlet admits to being in a dangerously violent mood after his success:

now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

(Only too true! In a few minutes he will indeed do such bitter business!)

In this interview with his mother, he must be calm:

I will speak daggers to her, but use none.

(iii) In the King's chamber, immediately after the performance. Claudius informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet must go, in their company, to England lest his lunacy become dangerous. *Polonius enters, as they leave, to assure Claudius that he will eavesdrop on Hamlet's talk with the Queen.* Alone, the King tries to pray, but cannot. *On his way to his mother's closet, Hamlet finds Claudius on his knees, is tempted to kill him on the spot, but restrains his impulse with the consoling thought that when occasion will be ripe*

for the act he can choose a moment when Claudius' soul will be sure to go to Hell. Right now it is most important to speak to his mother.

(iv) In the Queen's closet, *Polonius* urges her to be severe with Hamlet, then *hides behind the tapestry*. Excitedly, *Hamlet* enters her room and at once *begins to pour out a torrent of accusation against her*. She becomes frightened at his violence and calls for help. *Polonius* loses his wits and calls out too. Caught off guard by the commotion, *Hamlet* in a flash whips out his sword, thrusts it through the hangings, and kills the old man. After the deed, he cries:

Is it the King?

It was an act of sheer impulse. Had he reflected a moment, his intelligence would have assured him that it could not have been Claudius, whom he left praying in his own chamber only a few moments before.

Hamlet, when he sees whom he has killed, has no remorse, and turns back to castigate his mother with increased fury. At first she self-righteously denies any consciousness of having sinned:

What have I done, that thou darest wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?

But Hamlet compels her to confront the image of her licentiousness, until she sickens at the picture of what she is. His violence mounts. Suddenly the Ghost appears before him, interrupting his flood of accusation, and quiets him. Since Gertrude does not see the apparition, she concludes that Hamlet is talking to the empty air when he addresses the Ghost, that her son is truly insane, and that everything he has charged against her was, after all, but the raving of a madman. The spirit departs and Hamlet once more holds up the mirror for her to inspect her tainted soul. He does not realize, however, that he is now having no effect upon her—that she is now proof against self-examination, and luxuriating in the role of a mother sorrowing over her poor mad boy. *Hamlet understands that his killing of Polonius has called a halt to the pursuance of his revenge, and that Claudius now has an excuse for forcing him to go to England.* As he stands over Polonius' corpse he says ruefully:

I will . . . answer well
The death I gave him . . .

This man shall set me packing.

176-77; 211

The play is now more than half over, and there is still no question of procrastination, still no occasion for pretended madness.

INDISCRETION SERVES: ACT FOUR

(i) The same night. The Queen at once reports Polonius' death to Claudius; she represents the deed as a product of Hamlet's lunacy. *The King determines to send Hamlet to England immediately*, and dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find the corpse and convey his nephew to him.

(ii) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come upon Hamlet, and take him to the King.

(iii) Hamlet is brought before the King, and after fencing with the King's demand for Polonius' body, reveals its whereabouts. *Claudius tells Hamlet that he must go to England at once for his own safety*. Prepared for this move, *Hamlet is by necessity compelled to agree*. With an insult, he takes his leave. Alone, the King reveals the fact that *the English sovereign has been commanded by letter to put Hamlet to death upon his arrival in England*.

(iv) Fortinbras is passing, by permission of Claudius, with his army through Denmark. Hamlet, on his way to the port, noting the example of this prince's courage, regrets with good cause his own behavior, now that he is being hurried off into exile. God

gave us not

That capability and god-like reason

To fust in us unused.

When Hamlet forgot that divine faculty and acted on blind impulse in killing Polonius, he was guilty of

Bestial oblivion—

behaving like an unreasoning beast.

Thus ends the longest day of the tragedy.

(v) Some days later. The death of her father and the exile of Hamlet have broken Ophelia's mind. She wishes to see the Queen, who prefers to be spared the sight of the girl's distress, but allows

her to come in. Ophelia enters, and in her madness reveals the causes of her mental collapse. After she leaves, a messenger announces that Laertes, back from France, has collected a rabble which is storming the palace. Laertes enters and threatens Claudius because of Polonius' death. With admirable courage and ease the King quickly placates him, and convinces him of his own innocence. Ophelia returns. The sight of her madness overwhelms her brother with grief. In veiled language Claudius promises him satisfaction for the sufferings of his family:

Be you content to lend your patience to us,
And we shall jointly labour with your soul
To give it due content. . . .
And where the offence is let the great axe fall.

(vi) A sailor brings Horatio a letter from Hamlet, who has just landed in Denmark again. The message recounts how *on the second day of the voyage to England, the ship encountered a pirate. During the struggle, Hamlet boarded the pirate ship alone, won over the crew, and has been brought back to Denmark by them.* Hamlet asks Horatio to see that the King receive the letters he has addressed to Claudius, and desires his friend to hasten to meet him.

(vii) Claudius has found occasion to tell Laertes privately that it was Hamlet who killed Polonius; he assures him that before long he will hear satisfying news—i.e., from England, that Hamlet has been put to death. A messenger brings a letter from Hamlet to the King. Claudius is astonished to learn of Hamlet's return, which he attributes to his nephew's refusal to continue his voyage. The King wastes no time in speculation. *He plots with Laertes for Hamlet's death. Laertes is to challenge the Prince to a fencing match; instead of the sword with point and edge blunted, commonly used in such matches, Laertes will be equipped with one that is sharpened. Laertes not only proves amenable, but announces that he will anoint the sword with a deadly poison. To make sure of Hamlet's death, Claudius will also have prepared a poisoned drink for Hamlet in case the plot for the match should fail.* Gertrude comes in with the news that Ophelia has been drowned. Laertes breaks down at the report; he has a more powerful incentive for murdering Hamlet, for he holds him responsible for his sister's death too.

We are here at the end of Act Four. Still no procrastination, no feigned insanity.

THE FELL SERGEANT DEATH: ACT FIVE

The next day is the last day of the play.

(i) A sexton and his laborer-assistant are preparing Ophelia's grave. Hamlet and Horatio enter, and the Prince converses with the sexton, never guessing whose grave the latter is digging so light-heartedly. The funeral procession now winds its way through the churchyard, and Laertes angrily argues with the priest because Ophelia, on the suspicion of being a suicide, has not been accorded full rites of Christian burial. It is thus that Hamlet learns of her death. The Queen, scattering flowers in the grave, regrets that Ophelia did not live to marry Hamlet. Laertes, in a torrent of sorrow, leaps into the grave and asks to be buried alive with his sister. Hamlet, disgusted at this public display of grief, and himself shocked by the news that Ophelia is dead, jumps into the grave after him. Laertes starts grappling with him, and they are forcibly parted by the attendants. Hamlet upbraids Laertes for his ranting and protests that he has loved Ophelia more than any brother could. He dashes out, followed by Horatio. Claudius bids Laertes be patient by covertly reminding him that today is the day on which their revenge upon Hamlet will be accomplished.

(ii) Later the same day. Hamlet's unexpected return to Denmark is now more fully explained. *He tells Horatio of his discovering aboard ship Claudius' letter ordering his execution, and how he substituted another letter demanding the slaying of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Fate, cooperating with Hamlet's intuitions, has proved kind to him, and has given him another chance to further his plans for avenging his father. The document commanding Hamlet's death, now in his possession, is tangible proof that Claudius is a murderer. Before the news of the death of his erstwhile friends can come from England, Hamlet concludes:*

{ the interim in mine.

He expresses regret over his hasty anger with Laertes, for he now realizes the similarity of their cases: both have had their fathers slain.

Osrice, a young fop, enters with the challenge to a rapier match with Laertes, which Hamlet accepts. Another lord enters to ask whether Hamlet prefers dueling now or some other day. Hamlet is ready for the match now, and sends back a message to the King full of double meanings:

I am constant to my purposes; they follow the King's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready, now or whenever, provided I be so able as now.

Hamlet has the evidence to prove the King's attempt against his life. The match would be a splendid occasion for calling the court together, and he seizes the opportunity.

He is conscious of a vague foreboding of ill, and Horatio at once offers to have the match called off. But Hamlet refuses to give in to his premonitions.

The court now comes in. But when Osrice offers the foils, *Hamlet does not trouble to inspect them or to notice that the one Laertes chooses is sharpened at the point.* The match begins, but Laertes, loath to carry out the dastardly scheme, fences halfheartedly. The King sends the poisoned cup to Hamlet, who bids the servant put it by till later. The Queen, excited by the match and ignorant of the contents of the goblet, drinks before the King can prevent her. *Laertes at last spurs himself and succeeds in wounding Hamlet.* The Prince now fights furiously. *During the scuffle they exchange rapiers and Hamlet soon runs Laertes through.* The Queen dies from the poisoned wine. *Laertes, dying too, tells Hamlet he has not much longer to live—that the blade was envenomed—and reveals that Claudius is to blame.* *Hamlet rushes at the King and stabs him with the envenomed rapier; then amidst the cries of "Treason!" of the assembled courtiers, he forces the poisoned drink down Claudius' throat.* As the venom is doing its fatal work on Hamlet, Horatio seizes the poisoned cup, but Hamlet dashes it from his hands, and *pledges his friend to live so that he may recount the facts to the world.* Hamlet names Fortinbras as his choice as successor to the throne, and dies. Fortinbras enters and orders a soldier's funeral for Hamlet.

The play is ended, and the question of procrastination still waits to be raised. Moreover, there has not yet been any occasion for Hamlet to feign insanity.

Keeping the plot in mind, let us for a moment scrutinize the time element in *Hamlet*. Act One consumes two successive days. Act Two, the third day of the action, begins sometime thereafter—some two months later, as we presently discover—time sufficient for Laertes to have been residing in Paris for a while. All of Act Three and the first four scenes of Act Four take place on the next day. The next scene begins the fifth day of the action, a week or so later, the interim accounting for the return of Laertes (on hearing of Polonius' death) and Hamlet (brought back by the pirate ship) to Denmark. Act Five is concerned with the next day, the last day of the action.

There are thus only two intervals of time in the play: two months between Act One and Act Two, and about a week between the fourth and fifth scenes of Act Four. These two lapses of time have no direct bearing upon the story and are left vague by Shakespeare for that reason. It is only by calculation that the reader will be aware of them at all. They are present only because it does take time to go from Denmark to Paris, does take time to return from there, and does take time to make even an interrupted voyage to England.

During the second of these intervals Hamlet is busy sailing first in the direction of England and then back to Denmark. Since the rest of the play shows no intermission of time, *it could only be between the close of the first act and the opening of the second that he might under any circumstances be charged with delay*. The remainder of the story takes place on three action-crowded days immediately (save for the shipboard interval) succeeding one another.

Now, in a play the central theme of which is delay or procrastination, it is obvious that the time element would have to be of cardinal importance. We should have to be aware constantly that the days are passing, that our hero is allowing time to slip through his grasp.* But in *Hamlet* the passage of time is deliberately kept in the

* Shakespeare knew well enough how to impress on his audience the sense of the hours' marching relentlessly by, when he wished to do so. In *The Tempest*, for example, we are never allowed to forget that the action takes place between two and six o'clock:

PROSPERO. What is the time o' the day?

ARIEL.

Past the mid season.

background, far from our consciousness. For example, as regards the only considerable interval, the time between Act One and Act Two, we are nowhere informed during the entire length of the second act just how much later than the second day of the action

PROS. At least two glasses. The time 'twixt six and now
Must by us both be spent most preciousy.
I, ii, 239 seq.

MIRANDA. Alas, now, pray you,
Work not so hard. . . .

FERDINAND. O most dear mistress,
The sun will set before I shall discharge
What I must strive to do.
III, i, 15 seq.

PROS. For yet ere supper-time must I perform
Much business appertaining.
III, i, 95-96

CALIBAN. Why, as I told thee, 'tis a custom with him,
I' the afternoon to sleep. There thou mayst
brain him . . .
III, ii, 95-96

PROS. At this hour
Lies at my mercy all mine enemies.
Shortly shall all my labours end.
IV, i, 263 seq.

PROS. Now does my project gather to a head.
..... How's the day?

ARI. On the sixth hour; at which time, my lord,
You said our work should cease.

PROS. I did say so,
When first I raised the tempest.

PROS. V, i, 1 seq.
When I have required
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
..... I'll break my staff.

PROS. V, i, 51 seq.
And in the morn
I'll bring you to your ship and so to Naples.
V, i, 306-07

this day is supposed to be. It is only on the next day, in the middle of Act Three, that Ophelia gives the clue in a chance remark which we hardly heed because of our concentration on the Mouse-trap which is to be set before Claudius:

HAM. For, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours.

OPH. Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.

III, ii, 134 seq.

At our leisure—for as Hamlet's little play is about to begin, who can be bothered about such matters?—we make our reckoning, text in hand: in Act One we were told that the late king has been dead two months (I, ii, 138); if on this day in Act Three he has been dead twice two months, fortified by a course in elementary arithmetic we are able to multiply—twice two months makes four months; now we cleverly subtract the two months of Act One from the four months of Act Three, and we realize that two months have intervened between Act One and Act Three. Model mathematicians, we now note that Act Two took place on the day immediately before Act Three, and therefore, this time subtracting one day from the two months, we come to the brilliant discovery that Act Two began some two months after Act One. The significant point, however, must not escape us as we rejoice in our calculating powers: it is that the lapse of two months between the first and second acts was of no importance to Shakespeare, since he makes no mention of it until the play is half over, and then in the most casual style imaginable. In other words, the time element is of no consequence to the play—which would certainly not be the case if procrastination were the theme.

In terms of Elizabethan presentation, the matter may be stated even more emphatically. The first publications of *Hamlet* were issued without any indication of the division of acts or scenes, for the very good reason that the Elizabethan audience was unaware of these divisions. There were no intermissions between acts, no curtains to terminate scenes; characters entered and made their exits, scene followed scene, without a break. On Shakespeare's stage, therefore, the interval between the first and second acts would have had practically no effect upon the consciousness of the audience, par-

ticularly when no mention was made during the course of Act Two of any specific passing of time.

As for these two months between Act One and Act Two, the only time Hamlet can by any stretch of the imagination be held to procrastinate—what shall be said of them? Well, no five-act play can be thought to have as its subject matter an idea which is never dealt with on the stage and is exhibited solely off stage *between* the conclusion of the first act and the opening of the second. That forms no part of the action; it is rather business that the dramatist wishes to throw out of consideration from his story. In short, the interim between the first two acts of *Hamlet* is there only because reasonableness requires it. The fact that Shakespeare was as vague as possible about it is plainly owing to his desire that we attach no significance to it.

Shakespeare's Hamlet, *then*, is not a play about a man who procrastinates* or a man who feigns madness. Neither appears in the

* One scene in *Hamlet* (III, iii, 73-96) more than any other has been fastened upon as a basis for the concept of procrastination—the brief scene in which the hero comes upon Claudius apparently in prayer—a moment of the drama that has bedeviled the perspective of many a commentator. Kittredge, who accepts the idea of feigned insanity (even though he admits that “the device . . . adopted on the spur of the moment . . . is unsuccessful”¹), comes fairly close to the truth about Hamlet's procrastination; but alas! with this play a miss is as good as a mile. Realizing Hamlet's need of confirming “the testimony of the Ghost,” he understands that up to the presentation of “The Murder of Gonzago” there is no delay on the hero's part. But directly after that, Kittredge thinks, when the Prince beholds the King on his knees, Hamlet is free to strike, knowing that the Ghost was honest. He observes that “the strenuous avenger Laertes would not have hesitated to plunge his sword into the King's back.”² The reasons Hamlet advances for not doing this, avers this commentator, are not the true ones. “He does not really postpone his uncle's death in order that he may consign him to perdition. The speech is merely a pretext for delay.”³ According to Kittredge Hamlet here procrastinates because he “cannot butcher a defenceless man.” He does not kill Claudius now, when he might be expected to, because “such an act is not in accord with Hamlet's nature and education.”⁴ (But Hamlet butchers a defenceless Polonius in a few moments, and Hamlet later sends defenceless Rosencrantz and Guilden-

work. It is not true, as Professor Stoll and others have argued, that because delay is a convention of plot in the typical Elizabethan revenge play, we must therefore look for it inevitably in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this tragedy there is no procrastination, there is no delay.

stern to their deaths without a qualm in either case—and against none of them does he harbor the grievance he holds against Claudius.)

Of course, if you are burdened with the misconception that the theme of the tragedy is procrastination, you will naturally seize upon this scene, for it is the only one during which the action shows Hamlet failing to kill the King. For this reason Bradley considers it the "turning point of the tragedy."⁵ But there are several cogent reasons (all of them dramaturgical) why no great weight can be attached to anything that occurs in this scene:

¶ To begin with, although four different dramatic situations are developed in this scene—the interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with Polonius, the King's attempt to pray, and Hamlet's appearance—these happenings are so sketchily dealt with that the aggregation amounts to only 98 lines—constituting one of the briefest scenes in the play. Dramatic effectiveness requires any happening of importance to receive a certain extensiveness of treatment. The audience must have time to digest the event and be impressed by it if it has significance—as witness Hamlet's interview with the Ghost, his scene after that with Horatio and Marcellus, his listening to the passage from the *Dido* play, his interview with Ophelia, the presentation of "The Murder of Gonzago." Though putting this little scene to several good uses, Shakespeare fundamentally uses it as a "breather" in between the two most important scenes of the act: the most exciting scene of the play and the climax of the plot, both of which are extended to lengths commensurate with their importance.

¶ Hamlet does not appear in this scene until line 93, and then to make but one speech of 23 lines.

¶ This speech is, moreover, a soliloquy. And in a good play, however engrossing a soliloquy may be, it can never determine the course of the plot since nothing can *happen* during it.

As Hamlet enters on this scene, we are to understand that it is but a matter of a few minutes since we heard his last soliloquy—no longer than it has taken him to walk from one room in the palace to this corridor (represented on the Elizabethan stage by the inner stage at the rear) adjoining the King's and Queen's private chambers. Hamlet pauses. The King, his back to him, is at his prayers.

If the tragedy is not about the hero's fatal procrastination or delay, what then is it about? Having discarded all preconceptions, and having examined the plot and seen that it reveals neither delay nor feigned insanity, we are almost ready to decide what kind of

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.
And now I'll do it.

There is but one action that can accompany those words: Hamlet whisks out his sword. We are not unprepared for this. A few minutes ago, he confessed himself ready to drink hot blood, to be in a dangerous mood. We shall not be unprepared either, a few minutes from now, when his sword is out again, thrusting a death-blow at the form concealed behind his mother's tapestries.

Why does he not kill the King now? (Masefield: Because of his characteristic and "baffling slowness."⁶ Spencer: Because Shakespeare is not ready to end his play.⁷ Tillyard: Because Hamlet doesn't really wish to kill Claudius. A true son of a murdered father would cut the murderer's throat even in a church.⁸ Bradley: Hamlet "has no effective desire" to kill Claudius.⁹ Kittredge: The entire soliloquy "is merely a pretext for delay."¹⁰ Wilson: He rationalizes his sparing of Claudius to make delay "more palatable to him at the moment."¹¹

The truth is that Hamlet now knows at last that the King is his father's murderer; every fiber in his body is straining to put an end to Claudius' hated existence, and Hamlet's hand is only too ready to do the deed. But he was never better launched than now upon his course of vengeance. His intelligence assures him that this is not yet the moment to kill Claudius. Though on the road to achieving proof of the King's guilt to show the world, Hamlet has not the proof yet. The rest of his speech, therefore, is his attempt to force himself to sheathe his sword again, unwilling as his hand is to obey his intellect. His words are not at all a pretext, an excuse for delay—but rather addressed to his inner violence. Be patient, be patient, he is telling his blood: the time will come when it will be right to strike, and when the time comes I shall choose the moment—not one like this, when the villain is making his peace with heaven, but

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in 't—
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,

man Hamlet is and to identify, as we must, his tragic flaw. But not quite yet. First, to be safe, let us stay with the plot a little longer.

THE CLIMAX OF *HAMLET*

To comprehend a play perfectly it is always necessary to know where precisely the climax is to be found. For the climax is the pivotal point of the plot, and, if the drama be the work of a capable playwright, one's analysis of the basic plot and the characterization must show up as true or false once the climax is correctly identified.

The climax of a well-constructed plot is the moment of action which determines the course of subsequent events towards a more or less inevitable conclusion. The climax settles the direction which the rest of the plot must take according to the laws of probability.

The climax may also be defined in terms of the characters of the story. At the beginning of any plot the persons of the drama stand in a certain relationship to one another. In a play worthy of the name, since there is action, movement, these relationships become

And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

These lines, by the way, have given great offence to the critics. (Hammer: "This speech of Hamlet . . . [has] something so very bloody in it, so inhuman, so unworthy of a hero, that I wish our poet had omitted it." ¹² Samuel Johnson: "This speech . . . is too horrible to be read or to be uttered." ¹³ Hunter: "In the whole range of the drama there is, perhaps, nothing more offensive than this scene. Hamlet is made to dote on an idea which is positively shocking." ¹⁴ Adams: "One of the most revolting sentiments in all Shakespeare." ¹⁵) Anyone who knows Elizabethan literature ought to be aware that none of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have been greatly shocked by Hamlet's words. They merely prove that Hamlet is no milksop, that the blood in his veins is red, and that when he hates he hates thoroughly. At any rate, we need not be over-nice or subtle about this outburst. Hamlet means exactly what he says.

His mother waits and he must hasten to her. Hamlet's swift unsheathing of his sword warns us that it will not take much for his reason to lose control over his surging violence, after the success of his little play, and become engulfed by recklessness—as it does in a matter of moments.

altered during the progress of the plot.* The climax of the drama is the happening which causes the greatest dislocation in the balance established among the chief persons of the drama at the opening of the plot.

Thus, the climax of *Romeo and Juliet* is the killing of Tybalt by Romeo. Up to that moment there has been always the possibility of happiness for the lovers, despite their difficulties. Romeo, we feel, has had but to inform old Capulet that he is now his son-in-law, and after some to-do over the clandestine nature of the marriage, Juliet's father would have welcomed him into the family, having already said of him:

Verona brags of him
To be a virtuous and well-governed youth.
I would not for the wealth of all this town
Here in my house do him disparagement.

I, v, 69 seq.

But once Romeo slays Tybalt, all hope for his marital felicity is gone. The Prince has already decreed death to anyone fighting in the streets; as Tybalt's slayer Romeo is doubly doomed.

A great deal of careless talk concerning the meaning of climax has resulted generally in very slovenly thinking about an aspect of dramaturgy of primary concern to the playwright. In grammar school we were taught as a boy that the climax is the "high point" of the story, the most intensely exciting moment of the plot; we had drawn for us on the blackboard a long climbing line to represent the

* It is the lack of this alteration in the relationship of the characters which would disqualify Plato's *Dialogues* as drama, which of course they make no pretensions to being. But the *Dialogues* contain many important ingredients of superior drama which only too many plays lack: they have characterization, brilliant dialogue, noble ideas, wit, gravity, charm, and excitement. The characters, however, stand in the same relationship to one another at the end as at the beginning—except, of course, on the ideational level. We might put the matter another way: the *Dialogues* of Plato have no plot. And, to move from the sublime to the sentimental, it is on the same grounds that most of the so-called plays of Mr. Saroyan must be pronounced not plays at all; the persons of his "drama" tend to experience no alteration in their relationships as established when first they are introduced.

rising action, and then at the climax a sharp angle from which the line swooped downward to show the falling action. In our adolescent mind, regularly nurtured at the nickelodeon, the climax came to be perfectly illustrated by the tense moment when the hero and the villain were struggling at the edge of the cliff; the villain fell off, and there began the descending action. In works of that sensational quality the moment of greatest excitement might indeed coincide with the climax, but it is not true that it necessarily does so or even usually does so in great tragedies. Such a coincidence of climax with point of highest excitement would tend to make the crucial deed far too theatrical for the purposes of the tragic experience. For instance, though exciting enough, the killing of Tybalt by Romeo is less tense a moment of drama than the killing of Mercutio, which immediately precedes it—and is the less tense because it follows so closely on the fatal wounding of Mercutio. But the death of Romeo's friend, although more exciting than the death of Tybalt, despite the fact that it *leads* directly to the climax, is not in itself the climax of the play. When Tybalt re-enters to fight with Romeo, difficult though it would be, the latter, if he were sufficiently heedful of his future happiness, could still say, "Tybalt, I cannot fight with you; I am married to Juliet, and you and I are now bound by ties which should promote our friendship, not our enmity." He might also remind Tybalt, as he did Mercutio and Tybalt a few minutes earlier, that

the Prince expressly hath
Forbid this bandying in Verona's streets
III, i, 91-92.

Instead he throws discretion to the winds, forgets Juliet and the life he might have with her, and is only conscious of the guilt he feels for Mercutio's death. We love him none the less for his youthful rashness, but once his sword runs Tybalt through, Romeo is headed straight and inevitably for catastrophe. Such is the typical act of the tragic hero at the climax of the drama.

Unfortunately, the hero-struggling-with-the-villain-at-the-edge-of-the-cliff attitude colors much of the discussion concerning the climax of *Hamlet*. The Mouse-trap presented before Claudius, Gertrude, and the Court is very probably, as Mr. Wilson enthusiastically describes it, "the most exciting episode in Shakespeare's greatest drama."¹⁶ Certainly at no other part of the play are there so many

absorbing things to watch: Claudius' reaction to the little drama, and Gertrude's too; Hamlet's eager anticipation of what may happen and his close observation of the King and Queen; Horatio's careful attention; the reactions of the court to whatever is to be the conduct of the King, the Queen, and Hamlet; Polonius' preoccupation with Hamlet's apparent attentions to Ophelia; Ophelia's renewed hopes in her lover's affection; and the Mouse-trap itself—a whole, complex world of dramatic interest, presented all at once and yet in such a way that we can enjoy every bit of it! There is, in all likelihood, no scene in any other play in which the audience's pulses beat with such wild excitement. None the less, there is no justification for Mr. Wilson's pronouncement that "The play scene is the central point of *Hamlet*. It is the climax and crisis of the whole drama."¹⁷ That scene certainly advances the action with an enormous bound forward, and it *does lead* directly to the climax. But it is not in itself the climax of the play. At its conclusion it is true that the fearful possibility which reason has prevented Claudius from entertaining is now a dangerous certainty: the King now definitely knows that Hamlet is aware of his father's murder and the identity of the murderer; it is also true that Hamlet's uncertainty concerning the reliability of the Ghost has been settled. But despite this tightening of the dramatic tension, Hamlet and Claudius—who are the central figures in the tragic conflict (who else could they be?)—remain, for all their greater enlightenment, in the same relationship they held at the end of Act One. Ever since the Ghost's revelations, Hamlet has been the pursuer and Claudius the pursued; the end of the play scene finds them, though both fortified by more knowledge, in the same roles. Hamlet is, to be sure, more the pursuer and Claudius more the pursued now, but the Prince's task, though progressing, remains to be accomplished. Moreover, there is the important puzzle still to resolve for his peace of mind: what role has his mother played in his father's death?

Mr. Wilson's view of the climax, if incorrect, is not absurd, for the play scene (like Mercutio's death) is the most powerful event *leading* to the climax. Other scholars, however, are egregiously in error when they agree with Professor Bradley in seizing upon the one little scene in which Hamlet might be shown as procrastinating, the moment when he refrains from killing the kneeling Claudius, as

"the turning-point of the tragedy."¹⁸ This "sixth soliloquy" has been described as for long being most widely accepted "as the crux of the play." The temptation to bolster the theory of delay by the one occasion where it might be said Hamlet does nothing is understandable. But, leaving aside the esthetic criterion of the folly of looking for the climax in a scene that in its entirety is given twenty-three lines, there remains the greater absurdity of expecting to find the climax in a soliloquy (Hamlet's only speech in this scene) in which nothing occurs but the pouring out of words. The soul of drama is action, and the climax (of all parts of the play) must be an action. Finally, Hamlet and Claudius are in precisely the same relationship to each other at the end of Hamlet's twenty-three lines as before he entered upon that scene. Nothing has changed; he has merely *not* killed the King yet. More importantly, his not killing the King *then* in no way affects the course of events—if we may be allowed to phrase so silly an idea.

But greater depths of ineptitude have been reserved for some recent scholarship. Mr. Johnson reports that there is a "speech that seems, by general consent, to have replaced Hamlet's sixth soliloquy (III, iii, 73-96) as the crux of the play; it is Hamlet's response to Horatio's suggestion that he avoid the fencing match with Laertes:

Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all."¹⁹

V, ii, 230 seq.

This general consent has largely been given by that school of critics which takes the quasi-religious view of Hamlet as an instrument of Providence in the assassination of Claudius, the task being to cleanse Denmark. Mr. Johnson, therefore, is of accord. "Hamlet felt, before he left Denmark, that all occasions informed against him;"²⁰ he comes back with a markedly changed attitude—"all occasions are informing for him now."²¹ He is ready promptly to comply "with the pleasure and purpose of Providence."²² Hence, the "defy augury" speech is the "crucial speech" of the play;²³ "in Act I he was a student prince; in Act V he is the ordained minister of Providence. In the intervening acts . . . as in the morality plays, the con-

flict between man's divine nature, embodied in the rational soul, and his bestial nature, embodied in the animal soul, brings him to the verge of despair, from which he is saved by the intervention of Providence." ²⁴

We confess a difficulty in summoning the patience requisite to the high seriousness of our inquiry when we are faced with such hyperbolic folderol as this. Everything about it is wrong. It transforms *Hamlet* from a great tragedy to a morality play of the Middle Ages; the pulse-stirring complexities and subtleties of a masterwork to the naive, if mildly effective, simplicity of *Everyman*, with which indeed this critic finds it has strong affinities; the creator from the most brilliant and successful dramatist writing for a virile, full-blooded age to a medieval monk tinkering on the stage with theological abstractions; the hero from the tragic framer of his own doom to a mere colorless "instrument." It also performs two unpardonable esthetic crimes: that of looking for the climax of one of the longest tragedies extant in the last scene (—in this instance the hero at the climax would seem to ascend yet higher from the edge of the cliff, down which the enemy-animal soul has just tumbled!); worse still, that of discoursing upon tragedy not as an imitation of life which must show men in action, but as though it were the function of drama statically only to exhibit changes of attitude on the part of the hero.* It is, moreover, sublimely indifferent to the very nature of

* Suggestion for the plot of a modern play built on these principles: Our hero, Cyril, living in the historic town of Banbury, is the victim of a mild case of kleptomania, despite a fundamentally moral nature. He is constantly torn between a desire for the ethical life and an irresistible compulsion to filch books from the shop of his uncle, the local bookseller, and Banbury tarts from the trays of his cousin, the baker. The case is further complicated by the fact that the baker and the bookseller, two avaricious bachelors, are very wicked men with a side line in the black market. Cyril is properly patriotic, and loathes the fact that these relatives of his should be responsible for the something that is rotten in Banbury. For the better part of four acts, Cyril is tortured by his hate of them, his shame of his own pilferings, and his worry over his steadily increasing *avoirdu pois*, which (because of his raids on the tarts) begins to make locomotion difficult; we behold him warring between man's divine nature, embodied in Cyril's rational soul, and his bestial nature,

drama to look for the crux of a play in a speech, no matter how revealing, unallied to significant action.

With all these points of view there is a further shortcoming. In a great tragedy, since the hero falls through a defect of character, the tragic flaw must of necessity be in evidence at the climax; the deed which becomes the turning point of the plot must be an expression of his tragic failing. Thus, when Romeo at the climax kills Tybalt, his tragic flaw of rashness is clear. He even cries, as he draws his sword to fight him:

Away to Heaven, respective lenity,
And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!

III, i, 128-29

Instead of reasonably telling Tybalt of their new ties of kinship, he says in effect: "I here renounce the mildness which reflection would dictate, and surrender myself to fury to lead me now!"

embodied in Cyril's animal soul, until he is on the verge of despair, from which he is saved in the nick of time by Providence. In the middle of Act Four, a stroke of lightning burns the bakery to the ground with the baker in it. Occasions which have been informing against Cyril now inform for him. The source of tarts and the temptation therefor, as well as the black-marketeer, are all eliminated at once. In the Fifth Act, Cyril steps to the footlights and delivers a long "realizing" speech (Mr. Odets alone, perhaps, could do this full justice): he recognizes in the consuming shaft of lightning that divinity which is literally shaping his ends by saving him from a fatal *adiposis*; he realizes that with the evil cousin incinerated there remains only the wicked book-seller-uncle keeping the time out of joint in Banbury; he understands, now that occasion informs *for* him, that he must cleanse the town as the instrument of benign Providence; and he resolves (this is our climax) that whenever Providence sees fit to present the opportunity, his will be "a willing compliance with the workings of heaven."²⁵ His chance occurs later that same day. His uncle asks him to accompany him on the bus down to London; at the bankside Cyril pushes him into the Thames. Our hero returns to Banbury, having fulfilled his mission as the instrument of Providence, appropriates the bookstore, as the nearest heir, and suffers no more from kleptomania. A library now at his disposal, and the tarts a thing of the past, he gives his days and nights to the reading of Thomas Aquinas and Shakespearean commentary.

If the play scene is indeed the climax of *Hamlet*, what tragic flaw of the hero is there exhibited? *

The thoughtful reader may by this time have identified the climax of *Hamlet* for himself. A reading of our plot summary will plainly reveal it. There is obviously but one moment in the tragedy, but one deed of Hamlet's, which conditions unalterably the course of the remaining action—and that is his killing of Polonius (III, iv). At the instant he raises his sword to plunge it through the arras, he has been managing his cause very well. The Mouse-trap has indeed captured the horrible truth about Claudius, and Hamlet can banish forever his doubts concerning the Ghost. He is free to make further plans, knowing at last that he is on the right track. He has, moreover, caused Claudius to behave publicly in a way sufficiently suspicious to back whatever disclosures the Prince hereafter can make to Denmark. If he would reflect but for a fleeting second before his blade makes its rent in the cloth, he must know that whoever may have just cried out behind the arras, it cannot be the King, for him he has just left praying in the adjoining chamber. But he too, like Romeo, at the crucial moment throws respective lenity to heaven, and is willing to allow fire-eyed fury to be his guide now. Rashly he stabs the old man, not knowing who his victim is, and he pays heavily for his folly.

This deed reverses roles for Hamlet and Claudius. It is now the Prince who becomes the pursued and the King who can become the pursuer. Claudius, certain now of Hamlet's being a threat to his safety, is able (as Hamlet soon realizes, though too late) to hustle

* Apart from the fact that no tragic flaw of Hamlet's is illustrated by his giving of the Mouse-trap, Mr. Wilson might be at a loss to answer the question on other scores. To him "*Hamlet* is a tragedy, the tragedy of a genius caught fast in the toils of circumstance and unable to fling free."²⁶ In other words, Hamlet owns no tragic flaw, is not the author of his own doom, is only a victim of chance; and the play itself is rather a study in pathos than a tragedy, and its hero a first cousin to Little Nell. Elsewhere, however, Mr. Wilson says that it is a tragedy of "a great and noble spirit subjected to a moral shock so overwhelming that it shatters all zest for life and all belief in it."²⁷ If being overwhelmed by moral shock be some species of tragic flaw, how does the play scene evidence it?

the Prince off to England and remove him from the place where alone he can pursue his task of vengeance. Precisely when his position is most favorable, precisely when he has established the basis for a just revenge, Hamlet loses everything through one foolish act of recklessness.

If our principles hold fast—and they do—Hamlet has exhibited in this “rash and bloody deed” the tragic flaw which will bring him to catastrophe. His tragic failing is apparently some kind of recklessness? Incredible? No, merely true. Hamlet falls not because he is too timid, too sensitive, too thoughtful, or too scrupulous, but because he is too rash, too overweening, too heedless.

SOME QUESTIONS RAISED CONCERNING THE TRANSACTIONS OF THE PLAY

Before we come to discussing more fully Hamlet's character and the characters of the other people in the tragedy, it would be well to settle some other matters concerning what happens in the play itself. These matters have been subject to much misinterpretation too, sometimes because of unawareness of or insufficient attention to objective fact, sometimes because of a disoriented comprehension of the characters involved. Let us take these problems as they arise, act by act.

ACT ONE

*Why did not Hamlet succeed to the throne
upon his father's death?*

It has often been thought that Claudius' purpose in marrying Gertrude was “to steal the throne from Hamlet.”²⁸ * At the least it

* Wilson goes much further: Claudius' “usurpation is one of the main factors of the plot”;²⁹—though this scholar concedes that Hamlet's only two direct references to what he calls the Prince's “blighted hopes of the succession . . . occur very late in the play.”³⁰ To bolster this view he is forced to distort Hamlet's first line, *A little more than kin, and less than kind*, into a reference to Hamlet's “disappointed hopes of the succession.”³¹ Actually the line simply means that because of the

is felt that "there is something amiss here: brothers do not succeed brothers, unless there is a failure in the direct line of succession."³²

But there is nothing necessarily "amiss" in the succession. It is not true that "brothers do not succeed brothers, unless there is a failure in the direct line of succession"—at least it is not true in this play. It was the elder Fortinbras, King of Norway, whom Hamlet's father killed in combat; yet it is not his son, young Fortinbras, who now sits on the throne, but the latter's uncle, even though young Fortinbras is very much alive (I, i, 80-107; I, ii, 27-33).

It is interesting to remember (what everyone seems to have overlooked) that in the old Hamlet story Belleforest has *Hamlet's father rewarded for his services to the crown by being married to the King's daughter* (Shakespeare's Gertrude). This would patently mean that it was Gertrude, not Hamlet's father, who was heir to the throne—that while she lived the crown was safely hers, and that the Prince, in any case, could not rule while his mother was alive.

Nevertheless, it is true that we feel in Shakespeare's play, as indeed in the Belleforest story, that Hamlet's uncle is more than consort to the Queen, that he is very much the king, and that the rule is as much his as hers. It appears that Shakespeare thought of this throne as shared jointly by King and Queen—that the death of Hamlet's father left Gertrude still monarch, and that Claudius' marriage to her rendered him half-sharer of the crown. Is not this the true meaning of Claudius' words in his opening speech when he refers to his wife as

The imperial jointress of this warlike state

I, ii, 9?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites this line as the earliest use of *jointress* to mean "a widow who holds a jointure,"³³ and the word is so glossed by Kittredge³⁴ and Wilson.³⁵ But since the *Oxford Dictionary* finds no previous example for such a meaning, its au-

marriage the King is more than Hamlet's uncle now, he is his stepfather too ("more than kin"); but though they are now more closely related they are not of the same kind, for the haste and the incestuous nature of the marriage prove Claudius to be less than human (a pun on "kind," which also meant "human").

thority in thus defining this usage is open to challenge. It would be both flat and undignified of Claudius to speak of his Queen as a widow who has been left an estate by the death of her late husband.

Shakespeare made "up his language as he went along—crashing . . . through the forest of words like a thunderbolt";³⁶ habitually he transformed adjectives into nouns, nouns into verbs, verbs into nouns, and in general played havoc with grammatical tradition. The *Oxford Dictionary* quotes several examples earlier in date than *Hamlet* of the use of *joint* to mean "united or sharing with one another"—as early, indeed, as 1424.³⁷ In our play the night has already been described as "joint-labourer with the day" in the preparation for war (I, i, 78). Shakespeare apparently made a noun, *jointress*, out of this meaning of *joint*. If our guess is right, Claudius is saying of his Queen that she shares the throne of Denmark equally with him.

Further, there is evidence that, to a certain degree, consent of the nobility is required in Shakespeare's Denmark before the claimant can be officially recognized. In the last act, Hamlet speaks of his uncle as having

Popped in between the election and my hopes;
V, ii, 65

again, as he is dying, he says:

I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras.

V, ii, 366-67

Claudius plainly rules with the consent of those he governs, and has legally been accorded the "election" of the nobles. From this point of view, Claudius cannot be said to have deprived Hamlet of the throne by either force or chicanery. One feels that Hamlet will be next to rule, and that Denmark expects him to wait graciously and patiently, just as, doubtless, Norway expects young Fortinbras to wait until his uncle's death for the succession.

Claudius may be an interloper, but he is not a usurper. To insist with Professor Wilson that the question of the succession is a major issue with Hamlet and therefore fundamental to the plot, is to tamper with the very premises of the story. It is also hard to see how anyone can read the play with an open mind and conclude that

Hamlet is bitter because *he* has not been made king, however bitter he is to see the man he loathes on the throne; his mind dwells on wider perspectives than personal ambition. He is agitated by far nobler and far more tragic concerns than an impatience to rule Denmark.

In Mr. Olivier's movie the entire issue was avoided by omitting the "imperial jointress" lines and keeping Claudius intoxicated throughout the scene. Other interesting novelties: the courtiers applauded Claudius at the end of his first speech as though *they* were at a play; Claudius quite publicly showed his hatred for Hamlet, despite his sugared lines; presently he jealously tugged Gertrude away from Hamlet, whom she was busy mothering.

*What function in the tragedy
do Hamlet's soliloquies serve?*

Of all of Shakespeare's heroes Hamlet is certainly the one most given to soliloquizing. It is so that we remember him. But since Shakespeare was a dramatist to his fingertips, this play is so powerfully constructed that, although we should be sorry to lose any of Hamlet's self-communings, the tragic impact of the plot in no way depends upon any of the soliloquies. By very nature of the soliloquy, nothing can happen during the delivery of one, and so the plot cannot be advanced by any one of them. Hamlet does not even come to one new decision during the course of any; if he did the play would be that much weakened, for a decision, being a dramatic fact, should evolve from a situation, not from oratory. Shakespeare's predecessors had used the soliloquy either to inform the audience of certain facts and situations, or for only the crudest kind of self-revelation by a character (akin to the silly confidences made in mid-Victorian melodramas by the villains to the audience, while they twirled their mustaches). But Shakespeare found a new use for the soliloquy. As we listen to one of his characters thinking aloud, he invites us to inspect the working of the man's soul. Often, as later in Browning's dramatic monologues, while we hear the character attempting to rationalize or justify his conduct, we understand him better than he is able to understand himself. It is thus that we see through the self-delusions of Shylock, Benedick, Iago, and Angelo while they are posturing to themselves—just as we do in the cases of

that evil pair, the Duke of Ferrara and that lost soul who soliloquizes in the shadows of a Spanish cloister.

Hamlet, largely alone in a setting which is poisonous to him, must pour out his powerful feelings often to the empty air lest he suffocate from the attempt to stifle them. We must be careful, however, to take him no more literally than we do Shylock or Benedick. The soliloquies in our play have by the dramatist been carefully and subtly allied to the action of the play. The sane approach, therefore, to each of them is always first to ask, "What has occurred to cause this outburst?" There is always something that has happened to occasion it. Hamlet in his agony writhes and shoots off sparks of anguish in all directions as he unburdens his feelings; but he always winds back to the dramatic fact which has impelled him into coruscations of dissatisfaction with the world and himself. That dramatic fact, that happening, is always at the core of the soliloquy. And it is only in the light of that happening that we can rightly understand his words, his disgust, his self-tormentings, his often unjustified self-accusations. As he stands before us alone and murmurs,

O that this too too solid flesh would melt . . .

I, ii, 129

what recent events have caused the sudden outburst of anguish he now indulges? They are: the death of his father and the hasty remarriage of his mother.

Concerning that marriage everything is like venom to him, and we require no Oedipus complexes to understand his revulsion. Nothing is more common than that a young man or woman who has cherished the illusion that his parents were ideally happy should feel disgust at the spectacle of a mother or father's second marriage—a disgust strong enough if the marriage takes place two years after the death of a beloved parent; how much more powerful when the interval is only two months:

A beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourned longer!

Worse yet, the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius was incestuous.

Why is the Queen's second marriage incestuous?

Such marriages have been held incestuous from early times, and the fight to lift the ban on them has not yet been completely won in England, where until 1907 the marriage of a man with his deceased wife's sister was forbidden. The bill to permit such a marriage was first adopted in Commons in 1850, but the Lords rejected it the next year. It was brought before the legislature in '56, '58, '59, '61, '62, '66, '69, '70, '71, '72, '73, '75, '77, '78, '79, '80, '82, '83, '84, '86, '88, '89, '90, '91, '96, '98, and 1900.⁸⁸ No wonder the fairies in *Iolanthe* thought it necessary to send Strephon into Parliament so that he might "prick that annual blister, marriage with deceased wife's sister!" At long last, in 1907, the bereaved male was free to pay his addresses to his sister-in-law. But even today the woman who did what Gertrude has done would be legally guilty of incest.

ACT TWO

What was the meaning of Hamlet's appearance and behavior in Ophelia's room?

Ophelia does not at all understand the experience which has terrified her; nevertheless the account she gives of it (II, i, 77-100) makes what happened clear enough. Clear enough, that is, if in listening to it we have not abandoned our common humanity.

As she was sewing in her room, Hamlet suddenly appeared before her, hatless (hats were then normally worn indoors), his jacket open, his stockings soiled and fallen, his knees trembling and his face dead-white, and looking as if he had just gone through hell. He took her firmly by the wrist, stood back at arm's length and, with his other hand on his brow, began to study her face. At length, "a little shaking" her arm, he nodded thrice, with a sigh so deep that it seemed a sob. Then he released her, and, his glance still fixed upon her, found his way out of the room.

Every aspect of this unexpected visit is mysterious and frightening to the girl; her confusion has encouraged the scholars'. A. C. Bradley: "When Hamlet made his way into Ophelia's room, why did he go in the garb, the conventionally recognized garb, of the distracted *lover*? . . . His main object in the visit appears to have been to convince *others*, through her, that his insanity was not due

to any mysterious cause, but to this disappointment (in love), and so allay the suspicions of the King." ³⁹ (It is true, of course, that the Elizabethan lover was occasionally represented as careless in his dress.) J. Q. Adams: "This slovenliness in costume has usually been interpreted as the pose of the forlorn lover. . . . But Hamlet's physical appearance cannot be explained on this score. He has 'no hat upon his head'; the sad lover is invariably represented with his hat plucked low over his eyes. . . . Hamlet's slovenly and foul dress is what one should expect from a 'natural' or idiot; and as such it is in perfect keeping with his announced plan of putting on an 'antic' disposition." ⁴⁰ J. D. Wilson: Hamlet's "mental instability," obvious enough in the preceding scene (with Horatio and Marcellus), here is shown to have "grown intense meanwhile." ⁴¹ G. W. Knight: This was "no mock-madness . . . Polonius sees the truth"; this was madness itself. ⁴² But if we think of Hamlet as a human being instead of as an automaton operating exclusively according to Elizabethan conventions, we shall find his motives and conduct comprehensible enough. The claims of scholarship are rightful, but so are the claims of human experience. When we examine a work of literature we must keep a just proportion between them; when a choice becomes necessary, we must allot precedence to human values. Let us consider the details of Ophelia's report:

¶ Why did Hamlet force his way into her room? Not to play the madman. Why should he wish to frighten his sweetheart with such capers if his objective were the King's opinion? He might more easily have appeared before his uncle as a lunatic, yet he never chooses to do so. Nor is it a symptom of real insanity that he appears before the girl he loves. The simple fact is, as we hear from Ophelia's own lips, that, as her father required, she has cut off all communication with the Prince:

as you did command,
I did repel his letters and denied
His access to me.

II, i, 108-110

Is it odd that he should have decided that he *will* see her, despite her avoidance of him—even if he must break into her chamber?

¶ Why was his dress disordered? Not because that disorder is—or is not—conventional for the sad lover or the melancholy man, as scholars have merrily argued pro and con. Why should he appear so before her only, that once, and never before *our* eyes? And not because that disorder would prove him mad. Why should he appear so before her and never before the King? Can we not understand by simply putting ourselves, as we are expected to do in a tragedy, in the hero's place? For some time her rejection of him has been torturing him; his mother's faithlessness has already caused him to stigmatize all women with frailty (I, ii, 147). Can we not conceive him, torn between his complicated worries over the Ghost's revelations and his bitterness at Ophelia's unexplained renunciation of him at a time when he most needs her love, flinging himself upon his couch without bothering to disrobe (though naturally without his hat on his head!), tossing about in anguished uncertainty—and then suddenly, with characteristic impulsiveness, jumping up, resolved to find out at once by confronting Ophelia without warning, whether or not she is such another as Gertrude? Can we not see him, full of this purpose, dashing to her room just as he was, his jacket half-opened, his stockings rumpled, his face white, his knees trembling, looking like a vision out of hell?

¶ How are we to interpret his actions in her room? He did not speak: he had come to see. Like most intuitive people, he was prepared to judge her by the way she looked when required to confront his gaze. It is an old prejudice of the race that innocent people always return our scrutiny with frank steady eyes, and that the guilty always shiftily look away.* And Hamlet had come to indulge this maggot. He held her firmly at arm's length to have a good look at her. He raised his other hand to his brow to clear away all other thoughts, a gesture common to men trying to concentrate on a problem before them. And how would Ophelia have reacted to Hamlet's study of her? Insecure herself, half convinced of the rumors floating about that Hamlet is unbalanced, easily frightened, she nat-

* A highly unreliable criterion. People often will look away out of shame for the brazenness of the inspector, or only because they have weak eyes. The hardened criminal is well-trained to outstare the innocent.

urally turned away in confusion and blushed—thereby seeming only too plainly to her lover to be guilty of falseness to him. He was only too much convinced of what he had feared, as his solemn nodding thrice betokens—a movement indicating the confirmation of his worst suspicions.* As he left the room, his eyes still fastened on her while he moved to the threshold, he carried with him the conviction that she had indeed abandoned him.

*Hamlet at first greets Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern with warmth;
what causes the change in his attitude towards them?*

When his old schoolfellows first appear, Hamlet is delighted to see them, and exchanges some jovial ribaldry with them—the kind of harmless bawdry young fellows indulge when they meet, the overflow of excessive good health and animal spirits. The passage concludes:

HAM. . . . What's the news?

ROS. None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest.

II, ii, 240–41

This pleasantry tinges Hamlet's merriment with bitterness again; he has good reason to know that Rosencrantz's "news is not true." And this sour note intrudes upon his warm and essentially gaily-intended:

What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands
of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?

* Kittredge, however sees in the movement a weightier significance: "It is at this moment that Hamlet decides he must renounce Ophelia and give up all thought of marriage and happiness. To involve an innocent girl in such a revenge as he contemplates would have been a crime."⁴³ This sounds high-minded enough, but there is no evidence of such a renunciation on Hamlet's part, nor is it normal that any man facing the gravest of problems should therefore think of renouncing a woman's love at such a time. As for Kittredge's reason, why need Hamlet have involved Ophelia in his pursuit of revenge? Claudius managed to kill his brother without involving Gertrude. And Hamlet would more involve Ophelia in his revenge by rejecting her love if she loves him, than by accepting it.

(The subtle and deeply stirring dramatic values of the ensuing dialogue have yet to be projected on the contemporary stage. Directorial and scholarly blindness towards this powerful scene is owing to the reasonless preconception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a pair of revolting traitors to their friend.)

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz have been warned by the King that Hamlet is "transformed" (II, i, 4-10). Here is already sad evidence. Has not Claudius shown his loving concern for Hamlet by summoning them to his side? They exchange glances as Guildenstern says with some astonishment:

Prison, my lord?

Hamlet responds, without explaining:

Denmark's a prison.

In relieving his heart he is mystifying theirs. Distressed at his unaccountable change of mood, they try to pass off the apparent irrelevance airily: if Denmark's a prison, the world must be one; has not Hamlet all a man could desire?

Imperceptibly Hamlet's feelings have altered: he has been thrust out of his pleasure at seeing his old friends into a recollection of his wretched circumstances. He attempts rather lamely to recapture his gaiety of a moment ago, but soon gives up. Let's go to the court, he suggests, for by my faith I'm not up to this discussion. Now occurs a most delicate and all-important moment of drama. At its commencement the two are Hamlet's dear friends; at its conclusion he has begun to divorce them from his affection forever. The men are on their way out, possibly arm in arm, when with easy cordiality Hamlet asks anew:

But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at
Elsinore?

Poor Rosencrantz! Too fond of Hamlet to be skilful in deceit with his friend, he is in an impossible situation. If he is to help "restore" Hamlet to his former self, he cannot reveal the King's part in their being there. Had he merely replied:

To visit you, my lord,

Hamlet's affection would in no way have become impaired. But he cannot speak with genuine innocence, despite the honorableness of his intentions, and so he tries to sound casual:

To visit you, my lord; no other occasion.

That "no other occasion," that one phrase too much, becomes the slender thread with which Hamlet strangles their friendship, the thread which leads him from love of them to hatred, and thence inevitably to their own death. It is by such chance slips of the tongue as Rosencrantz's that a man's whole destiny may be altered. No one who had come merely to visit his friend would have added that "no other occasion." It is too innocent to ring true. At first Hamlet reacts only to the "to visit you," and responds with warm thanks. But while he speaks, he is pricked with the awareness that something in Rosencrantz's words has had a hollow ring, something which gives the lie to the other's seeming ingenuousness. And so, on a sudden impulse, Hamlet stops in his tracks and asks:

Were you not sent for?

Dreadful to be playing the spy even in an apparently good cause! How can Rosencrantz look other than guilty at the demand of his friend, the random shot which has gone to the center of their embarrassment in his presence? His glance seeks Guildenstern's for support, while Hamlet, hot on the trail of discovery, halts their movement toward the exit, and presses for an answer:

Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, deal justly with me. Come, come. Nay, speak!

As they continue to hesitate, his anger rises. At last Guildenstern speaks, and like his partner attempts to sound as guileless as his conscience assures him he has the right to feel:

What *should* we say, my lord?

Unhappy pair! Hamlet misses nothing going on about him, catches every inflection of the voice, every glint of the eye, can almost see behind his back—and like all people so constituted is subject to immediate decisions of monumental importance on the frailest of grounds. To be but the twentieth part of one poor scruple less than

direct with such men is dangerous. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it proves fatal. Guildenstern's evasion is the knife that severs them both from Hamlet's love. His mounting anger spurs his intuitions, and he guesses that Claudius and Gertrude have sent for them, though he does not stop to consider, then or later, that his friends may be entirely innocent of malice toward him, that their objectives may do them no discredit. Foolishly, Rosencrantz protracts their reticence by one more brief evasion. Hamlet, seeing their defenses weakening, pushes his query more forcefully, conjures them by their long friendship to be "even and direct" with him. That plea is irresistible: they are his friends. Shamefacedly they admit:

My lord, we *were* sent for.

It is too late. Though now they are prepared to tell him everything, he will not give them the chance. With augmenting irony he goes on to tell *them* why they were sent for, before they can furnish him the facts. In this way, he sarcastically assures them, they may preserve their loyalty to the King and Queen—as though they were hirelings of the crown. In his tables he has already inscribed them as traitors, purchased, like the rest of Denmark, by Claudius.

*How and when does Hamlet hit upon the idea
of presenting the play before the King and Queen?*

Delighted at seeing the players, Hamlet has at once asked for a "passionate" speech from a play on Dido and Aeneas. Hamlet begins the speech and, to ingratiate himself with the Prince, Polonius compliments him on his delivery. But after the player continues where Hamlet left off, the old man finds the speech "too long." Hamlet, furious at the interruption, turns upon him in scorn, and apologizes to the player: Polonius can be pleased only with something vulgar:

he's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps: say
on. Come to Hecuba.

But Shakespeare himself had a very important dramatic reason for Polonius' interruption. Having dismissed it, Hamlet will turn with augmented intensity to listen to the player. And it is the next line which contains the phrase which gives Hamlet his all-important idea.

Shakespeare, by this device, both accounts for the impact of the line on Hamlet, and at the same time isolates the line by itself:

But who, O, who hath seen the mobled queen—

II, ii, 525

recites the Player. Hamlet is struck forcibly by the phrase "mobled (i.e., muffled) queen." Muffled Queen! That phrase might, figuratively, describe Gertrude—muffled as she is from his view! What could one do to rip off the layers of "seeming" which conceal the true Gertrude?

Thus, while the Player proceeds with the speech, Hamlet's mind is busy with a scheme—the idea of giving his little unmasking play. The psychology of the evolution of his plan is brilliantly suggested, although it seems never to have been noted by commentators. Hamlet, because of that "mobled queen," thinks first of a means of penetrating to his mother's secret. Next it occurs to him that he can do better even than that—perhaps unmask the King too!

ACT THREE

*What is the meaning of the
"To be or not to be" soliloquy?*

Just before Hamlet enters (III, i, 56), Polonius has placed a prayer book in Ophelia's hand, shown her exactly where she is to walk as if in the midst of her devotions, and then has retired with Claudius behind the curtain at the back of the stage—the regular place for "overhearing" on the Elizabethan stage. When Hamlet comes in, he is at first oblivious of her presence, and delivers the most celebrated (and most completely misunderstood) of his soliloquies.

Doubtless it is too celebrated for its own good, despite the majesty of its utterance. Charles Lamb confessed that he could no longer "tell whether it be good, bad, or indifferent; it has been so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men, and torn so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play, till it has become to me a perfect dead member." ⁴⁴ It is also the passage probably responsible for the old lady's saying that she

loves *Hamlet* because it is so full of quotations. It is also the point in the play where actors convey their conception of the hero to the pole opposite to Shakespeare's meaning by projecting visual grounds for the notion of an over-ratiocinating Hamlet: it is so often their pleasure to enter from the wings, one arm supporting the other, while the first two fingers touch the temple—a picture of the professional philosopher indulging in thought for the sheer fun of it—and then stand before the footlights to discourse, without provocation, upon life and death. It is here that the run-of-the-mill Hamlet has managed to stereotype the image of a ghastly rationalizing Prince, all brain and no body, into a likeness guaranteed to provoke laughter from the vulgar at any foolish mimicking thereof. In the popular imagination a “ham actor” is connected with this pose assumed by generations of Hamlets. Even the best of Hamlets tend to fall into the mold—though on a certain memorable occasion the comment of a highly remarkable cat should in all justice have been enough to smash it.

After his triumphant long run on Broadway, John Barrymore took the play to London. It chanced that there was reconnoitering off stage a certain cat whose name unhappily has not come down to us. A cat, but no ordinary cat—though it is doubtful that such a thing as an ordinary cat exists—a cat, in fact, of literary genius. When Barrymore entered for his soliloquy, supporting arm and fingers at the temple at approved angles, this same cat entered too, at a respectful distance, tail upright with delight. Hamlet was oblivious of the homage; the audience did its best not to titter. As Hamlet took his stand to plunge into heavy meditation, the cat scrutinized him first with some wonder. A very handsome Prince indeed—where had the stage ever seen a finer profile? A beautiful expressive voice. But what could be the meaning of the figure he was trying to cut? This was neither the accent of Christians, nor the stand of Christian, pagan, or man, it imitated humanity so abominably. Our intellectual cat had to decipher the puzzle. Quietly it walked to a spot directly in front of Hamlet, turned its back upon the audience, curled its tail about it, and gazed up in total astonishment at this strange being above it. It is not recorded whether the cat gave any voice to its critical opinion, but its posture and position were eloquent enough.

By this time the audience could no longer restrain its approving laughter. Caught in the middle of the soliloquy, Barrymore felt something amiss, looked down, and then raised his celebrated eyebrow indeed! With great tact, and a great deal more naturalness than earlier employed, he gently raised the critic, petted it, and quietly conducted it to the wings—where, no doubt, it was relieved to be among human beings again. This cat, which may very well have looked at more than one king, had never seen a prince so conducting himself, and let it be known to the world. What a pity that its critical judgment has not found dissemination! *

As we approach consideration of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy we are overwhelmed with concern: what apology can serve our turn for having the temerity to offer a new account of this celebrated passage? Well, to our business—*nec deus intersit nisi dignus vindice nodus!*

Almost universally Hamlet is conceived to be contemplating suicide in his opening lines.

To be or not to be: that is the question,

is by almost everyone taken to mean: "to remain alive or not to remain alive: that is the question." Hamlet is deciding, says Malone, "whether he should continue to live, or put an end to his life";⁴⁵ "he is meditating on suicide," says Bradley a century and a half later;⁴⁶ "again he is contemplating suicide," says Adams, "longing with infinite desire to make an end of his suffering with a bare bodkin";⁴⁷ "he is thinking of suicide, as in the First Soliloquy," says Wilson⁴⁸ (who feels, with many others, that self-destruction is a daily impulse of Hamlet's), and observes in passing that this is the opinion of most scholars. This conception accords readily with the idea of Hamlet as a man suffering from melancholia, neurasthenia, nervous breakdown, weakness of will, pessimism, this complex or that complex. It is also a conception totally wanting in tragic dignity.

Having accepted such a reading of Hamlet's thoughts, many commentators have gone on to register complaint against Shake-

* Barrymore himself was the authority for the authenticity of this incident.

speare's artistry in this passage. Hamlet, as they understand him, proceeds in the next lines to state the alternatives of remaining alive or killing himself. They construe

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

as a description of Hamlet's view of the consequences of living; and

. . . to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them

as a poetical elaboration of the idea of committing suicide. But, they ask, was not Shakespeare nodding when he wrote the second of these? How is it possible, they demand, to take arms against a *sea*? Shakespeare, they assert, surely confused images here.⁴⁹ To rescue Shakespeare from the imputation of failing in his craft of poet, many have come forward with suggestions. Some have proposed a "better" reading for the text's *sea of troubles* with such emendations as:

a siege of troubles (*Pope*)⁵⁰
th' assay of troubles (*Theobald*)⁵¹
assailing troubles (*Hamner*)⁵²
the seat of troubles (*Bailey*)⁵³—*this one rather Rabelai-*
sian?;

or would keep *sea* but alter *take* to *make*:

make arms against a sea of troubles,

meaning "to swim against a sea."⁵⁴ Others, on their part, have leaped to defend the text: Hackett thinks the sea "is the *heart*—the fountain of existence";⁵⁵ several others (with dubious intent) have observed that the Celts were known to resist the ocean flood with swords in their hands.⁵⁶ (The Danes, of course, are notoriously un-Celtic!) This is a pretty sad state of affairs. The emendations are all hideous; the defenses are no defenses. There is no escaping the conviction that *were* the traditional interpretation of the lines valid, Shakespeare must be accused of being slipshod—and at a most unpardonable moment. Moreover, *if* the traditional interpretation were valid, several other charges should also be brought against our poet:

1. The charge of being repetitious. If "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" be a description of the miseries of life, then why does he say it all over again four lines further on:

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to?

2. If both these mean, even roughly, the same—to the weakening of both—the first must be pronounced as quite inflated for a description of the miseries of life, inflated and poetically insincere. The second is honest and effective. If the traditional view were correct he, apparently having bungled the expression once, tried it over again, this time successfully. But that is no excuse for a poet while both are allowed to remain.

3. If the question in "To be or not to be" is whether to live or to commit suicide, then (despite the grandiloquent tones of the "declamatory boys" and actors) Shakespeare is guilty of expressing that question as feebly as possible. In the phrase "To be or not to be" there is nothing poetic; the phrase is, indeed, abstract, prosaic, couched in the language of logic, not the emotions. Matters of life-and-death demand poetry at its most superb, most specific, most moving.

It does not, of course, occur to us that these charges can be seriously brought against Shakespeare. In our private Compleat Gentleman it is written: "When dealing with a creator of stature, one even not of Shakespeare's stature, particularly when dealing with him at the height of his powers, assume that any apparent confusion you encounter is not his but your own. Do not seek comfort by postulating printer's errors. First examine your own understanding of the work. Where lay *your* short-sightedness which may account for your confusion?" These rules hold even in the teeth of the unsupervised conditions under which Shakespeare's plays were printed and of the carelessness of Elizabethan printers. We dare not presuppose error unless we are faced with no meaning. If intelligible sense conflicts with our own theory, we had better re-inspect the theory, rather than hasten to suggest alterations in the text. In the case of this passage, are we to admit that, at the height of his career, and at a sublime moment of one of his chief masterpieces, Shakespeare is

likely to be guilty of slovenliness and poetic ineptness? The question calls for a week's penance. Even at the beginning of his career, when he was subject to errors of taste, he could be over-extravagant as a poet, but never slipshod or sapless. It would be better if criticism remembered this.

Though most critics agree that the soliloquy is a product of Hamlet's contemplating suicide, not all interpret the first line to mean "to live or to destroy myself." Samuel Johnson saw the "question" as "whether, *after our present state*, we are to be or not to be."⁵⁷ J. Middleton Murry concurs with Johnson: it is the fear of something after death which "is the main dramatic motive of delay" in the tragedy.⁵⁸ Unable to make sense out of the imagery in the lines which follow, a few critics think that Hamlet speaks in a confused way to prove that he is insane: he knows his soliloquy is being overheard by the King.⁵⁹ (As though a soliloquy could be overheard in any but the most anemic play!)

Dowden and a couple of other scholars have been on the right track in rejecting the interpretation of suicide, but they have been either ignored or, as by Wilson, ruled out.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Dowden came closer to the truth than anyone when he thus paraphrased "To be or not to be": "Is my present project of active resistance against wrong to be or not to be? Hamlet anticipates his own death as a probable consequence."⁶¹ I. T. Richards considers that the opening line refers to Hamlet's intended killing of Claudius,⁶² and he too comes closer to Shakespeare's meaning than the bulk of critics.

Let us begin with the question which we recommended earlier: what is the dramatic fact behind the present soliloquy? Tonight "The Murder of Gonzago" will surely "catch the conscience of the King" if he is guilty. If he prove so, Hamlet must outline at once a plan of action that will enable him to avenge his father. The Prince now stands on the very threshold of the crisis of his problem. The closer the great event approaches, the harder it is for him to wait. He speaks, therefore, somewhat from impatience; but he also speaks somewhat from awareness that beyond tonight's test of Claudius lie, it may be, heavy deeds for him to do—deeds of blood and death.

And so he enters upon the stage this crucial day with all kinds of conflicting thoughts pounding in his head. Shall I wait until tonight to discover the truth? If my play unmasks him as my father's

murderer, what do I do next? Suppose he unmasks himself to me, but is clever enough to conceal the truth from the court, how will that help my cause? How can I be sure I can force him to announce his guilt to an unsuspecting world? How then do I bring him to justice? Justice! Why do I trouble myself with justice? ("Taint not thy mind!" said the Ghost.) Am I not asked the impossible when I am charged to wait until my cause is clear to the world? Why do I not kill this man at once—now? *

His first words, no one needs to be reminded, are: "To be or not to be." They are, we have said, colorless and abstract. Shakespeare wanted them so. There is no warrant for paraphrasing the first line into anything more concrete than "Is it (or, possibly, is this thing) to be or is it not to be—that is the question." What is this *it* or this *thing*? There can be no warrant for identifying it as more than some conclusion or decision Hamlet has just come to. What that conclusion or decision is, does not matter: all that we can determine from the lines that follow is that it has to do with the alternatives of waiting for the right moment to kill Claudius or killing him at once. (*To be*, for instance, might be the decision to wait or it might be the decision to kill now.) The rest of the soliloquy could not be more definite than it is; "To be or not to be" could not be more indefinite than it is. Shakespeare wishes, in short, to communicate neither more nor less than the fact that Hamlet has been debating with himself. What the subject of this debate has been, the lines immediately following make clear (or, rather, it is time that they should do so):

{ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—

Were it nobler done of me, Hamlet asks, to wait and suffer in my mind the hurts and wounds inflicted by the outrageous fortune which is mine?—that wicked destiny which asks him to act under conditions impossible to a rational and honorable man—the uncertain authority which commands him to avenge—that ironic fate which

* If the reader decide that we have invented these thoughts for Hamlet, let him be patient until we have concluded the analysis of the soliloquy.

restrains him from avenging until he can prove what seems beyond proof—

{ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
{ And by opposing end them.

Or shall I rather, Hamlet continues, *throw to the winds the dictates of reason, no longer wait and suffer in the mind—shall I recklessly hurl myself into the midst of this impossible complex of events, like a man opposing the ocean with a puny sword, and put an end to the contest by engulfing myself in them, and bringing about my own destruction?—shall he discard justice and reason, kill Claudius without more ado, and thus bring on the end of his problem, and thus, too, the end of himself?*

{ And by opposing end them. To die . . .

To kill Claudius now would be a swift solution of his troubles, an end to his anguish and doubts and to his waiting for the event, an end to his mental torture. But to kill Claudius would also be to meet his own death. Hamlet speaks of taking arms against a sea because he knows that to hurl himself recklessly upon Claudius, safe and protected by the good-will of Denmark, is as hopeless a gesture as would be an attempt to conquer the tumultuous ocean with a sword. Such an endeavor can end only in his own death. Far from thoughts of suicide, Hamlet is here meditating such reasonless precipitance as would involve his own death with his uncle's.

Having begun with a consideration of the wisdom of killing Claudius now, the soliloquy moves by natural gradation to the sphere of philosophical speculation. What does it mean "to die"?

{ To sleep—no more,

Hamlet would assure himself. And if by "sleep" we mean an end to "the heart-ache" and the thousand "shocks" of living—ah, that would be

{ a consummation
{ Devoutly to be wished!

—a consummation (not of suicide! but) of taking arms against a sea of troubles. *Kill Claudius and win forgetfulness.* To die, to sleep—perchance *not* to forget, but to dream! There's the obstacle ("rub")! For who knows what dreams we may have once we have "shuffled

off" the fuss of living ("mortal coil")? That is the consideration ("respect") that makes calamity so long-lived. Otherwise,

who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,*

when he might be rid of all this with an unsheathed dagger ("bod-kin")?

Though speaking philosophically, Hamlet is also a man, and his reflection is based upon his own experience. And this has been his experience: "the whips and scorns of time"—his having to be patient in his cause and bear the tortures of waiting and uncertainty; "the oppressor's wrong"—Claudius' seizing his father's throne and position of power; "the proud man's contumely"—the offensive haughtiness of the King's friends at court; "the pangs of disprized love"—Ophelia's rejection of his love; "the law's delay"—the endless waiting until one can bring a culprit like Claudius to justice; "the insolence of office"—all that he must bear at the hands of Claudius, and men like Polonius and Osric and (so he thinks) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; "and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes"—his entire situation, which requires of him patience, silence, and forbearing, while his enemy has everything his own way.

Who would bear, Hamlet asks, the burdens of this life, but that "the dread of something after death,"

The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

* Scholars are at one in considering these references to be impersonal and general. Madariaga says that these things "Hamlet could not possibly have suffered" since he is a prince; "Hamlet is here speaking in general terms." ⁶³ Joseph speaks of these lines as "producing in the form of a series of rhetorical questions example after example of people not normally regarded as heroic, who endure life when they might easily make away with themselves." ⁶⁴ We read a very personal meaning in Hamlet's words; in that light they are the more powerful, because more immediate.

These words touch so deeply upon our common feelings about death, it is small wonder the passage is revered.*

Hamlet concludes: it is just this kind of forethought ("conscience") which makes cowards of us all. And it is this consideration of the consequences of our acts which converts red-blooded action into pale brooding upon possible outcomes, and thus great enterprises often fail to be carried out.

What is the explanation of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia in the scene which immediately follows?

At the conclusion of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy Hamlet is suddenly conscious of Ophelia's presence (III, i, 88):

Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia!

He has just been confronting no less than eternity. His mood is a chastened one. And as he sees her quietly pacing back and forth intent upon her prayers, she seems like an angel herself, "so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint," that he murmurs gently:

Nymph in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered! †

* Yet, chorus the critics, why does Hamlet say that no traveler returns from beyond the grave when he has seen his father's spirit?

Furness: The line was "an apparent oversight."⁶⁵

Theobald: The Ghost came from neither Heaven nor Hell, both final resting-places, but from Purgatory, an intermediate place.⁶⁶

Schlegel: The remark proves that "Hamlet could not fix himself in any conviction of any kind whatever."⁶⁷

Wilson: "Hamlet has given up all belief in the 'honesty' of the Ghost, and . . . Shakespeare wrote the lines to make this clear."⁶⁸

Joseph: "At this moment he feels that the Ghost is an 'illusion.'"⁶⁹

Coleridge answered such absurd queries for all time—but with little avail:

"If it be necessary to remove the apparent contradiction,—if it be not rather a great beauty,—surely it were easy to say, that no traveler returns to this world, as to his home."⁷⁰

† The simple eloquence of these words has the very ring of spiritual peace. Nevertheless Wilson has a theory about this scene and he will

It is true that when he broke into her chamber he became convinced that she had renounced his love. But he still loves her, and is caught off guard; after his solemn meditations on life, he is so moved by her apparent purity and her beauty that it is his love which speaks for him.

not let the text speak for itself. "There is no warmth" in *The fair Ophelia*, he observes. "The touch of affectation in 'nymph' and 'orisons' (both pretentious words) and of sarcasm in 'all my sins' shows that Hamlet speaks ironically."⁷¹ Old Sam Johnson's sensibilities were certainly more alert when he said of these same words, "This is a touch of nature. Hamlet, at the sight of Ophelia . . . makes her an address grave and solemn, such as the foregoing meditation excited in his thoughts."⁷² As for Wilson's seeing only irony in *fair, nymph, orisons* and *all my sins*!

1. *fair*: Silvia, in the song, is

Holy, fair and wise

Two Gentlemen of Verona, IV, ii, 41;

in the same song it is asked,

Is she kind as she is fair?

For beauty lives with kindness;

the enamored Biron cries of his love,

I'll prove her fair or talk till doomsday here

Love's Labour's Lost, IV, iii, 274;

Bassanio says of beloved Portia,

And she is fair and fairer than that word

The Merchant of Venice, I, i, 162;

and Lorenzo of his beloved Jessica,

And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true

II, vi, 54;

Orlando of his Rosalind,

Carve on every tree

The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she

As You Like It, III, ii, 9-10;

Othello, when his love for her is overpowering his determination to kill that love, exclaims in anguish to Desdemona that she is

so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet

That the sense aches at thee.

Othello, IV, ii, 68-9.

Poor Ophelia, miserable at the role forced upon her by her father, incapable of speaking for herself, eagerly seizes upon the sweetness of Hamlet's first words, and inquires after his health. He thanks her, and adds a little dispiritedly, "Well, well, well." She too, her question has implied, has credited the rumors about his "transformation." And now the unhappy girl in her desperation tries an expedient that she trusts will heal the widening breach between her and her lover. It is the only thing we ever see her do on her own initiative—and how tragically unwise of her to do it! Her logic is touchingly feminine, but of the kind the male intelligence never apprehends at the moment of challenge. Unknown to her father she has brought with her some gifts Hamlet has given her in the past, and these she now presses into his hands. Too dutiful a daughter, timid and repressed, she dare not explain to her lover how far her heart is from the obedience with which she has followed her father's commands. She hopes that the sight of these little treasures, tokens of

All the men quoted above speak with deepest affection; presumably it is only Hamlet who uses the word without warmth.

2. *orisons*: It is the simple and innocent Juliet who says to the Nurse,

I have need of many orisons
To move the Heavens to smile upon my state
Romeo and Juliet, IV, iii, 2-4;

and in the simplest of scenes Milton's Adam and Eve in love of God,

Lowly they bowed adoring, and began
Their orisons, each morning duly paid.
Paradise Lost, V, 144-45.

For no reason, in Hamlet's mouth the word becomes "pretentious" and therefore ironic.

3. *nymph*: *The Century Dictionary* uses our passage to illustrate the meaning: "A young and attractive woman; a maiden. (Poetical)" ⁷³

4. *all my sins*: That this should be construed as ironic is most astounding of all. Barring saints, has any Christian felt so pure that his sins need not be remembered in the prayers of an innocent girl?

The reason for these distortions is Wilson's conviction that Hamlet has overheard Polonius' plotting to "loose" Ophelia to him, and therefore knows Ophelia has been planted where he has found her. Because of this untenable theory Wilson is forced to be deaf to the rapt tone of Hamlet's exclamation.

Hamlet's affection will somehow so work on him that he will find means to rescue her from her wretched situation, and place her safely under the protection of his love. It is a completely womanly inspiration, not too dissimilar from that which prompts Desdemona, when she is convinced she has lost Othello's love, to bid Emilia:

Prithee, tonight
Lay on my bed my wedding sheets.
Othello, IV, ii, 105-6

Hamlet, reacting as a man will react, is so far from understanding Ophelia's motives that he looks upon the return of the gifts as a gesture of her final rejection of his love (remember that he has been denied access to her and that his letters have been either unanswered or returned), and he murmurs in a pained voice:

No, no!
I never gave you aught.

(In reading the commentators on this scene, one must learn to sit like Patience on a monument. Kittredge, like Ophelia, knows that Hamlet *did* give her these presents, and so concludes that Hamlet is now talking "as insanely as he knows how. Ophelia replies with the gentle firmness which one might use to a refractory child."⁷⁴ Madariaga is sure that Ophelia, a licentious girl, has not at all obeyed her father; she has not only seen Hamlet, but has also admitted him to her bed. The proof? Had she refused to see her lover, "she would not return the trinkets alleging that 'rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.'"⁷⁵ Her earlier salute, *How does your honour for many a day?*, "proves that her door has remained open" to him, but that he is now too bored to wish to see her anymore.⁷⁶ Adams believes that her saying she has wished to redeliver his gifts "is an obvious falsehood"; Hamlet, suspicious at this, answers, "on his guard," that he never gave her aught; "producing the jewels," she continues "acting the part laid out for her . . . repeating words supplied by her father, as well as acting out an insincere scene contrived by him."⁷⁷ [As if this frightened girl could act out any part! She has been stationed at her post like an automaton by Polonius, who usually treats her like one, and left on her own, which is why she undertakes to "return" the gifts; Polonius and the King are not interested

in what she says to Hamlet, but what he says to her. Polonius is busy trying to prove that Hamlet is mad because of love for Ophelia.])

What Hamlet has given her he refuses to take back. Moreover, to accept them would be to grant his consent to the termination of their love, and that he is not willing to do.

But obvious-minded Ophelia takes him literally. She knows "right well" that he has made these presents to her (she is convinced her lover is truly unbalanced), and she knows too the sweet words with which they were offered. If his love is gone ("their perfume lost") she does not wish to keep his gifts.

Is there a more universal device among women than to provoke a lover's protestations of passion by accusing him of not loving? Shakespeare was familiar enough with it. Beatrice, for instance, who has more intelligence in her little finger than Ophelia possesses in her cranium, is not above this archness; when she would have Benedick kill his good friend Claudio, and he refuses, she has only to say:

There is no love in you
Much Ado About Nothing, IV, i, 295

and he is ready to change his mind. Lady Macbeth, no modest Griselda, when Macbeth shows signs of weakening in his determination to kill Duncan, cries in highly feminine fashion:

From this time
Such I account thy love.
Macbeth, I, vii, 38

If women can do this to incite their men to murder, it should not be surprising that Ophelia would hope by calling Hamlet's love into question she can incite him to work the miracle to free her from her misery.

But Hamlet reacts as a man will react. Men, being cruder than women, are more dangerously fond of logic; a woman has small patience with that kind of thinking. A man reasons from A to B, from B to C, and so on until he painfully reaches Z. A woman begins at Q, is next at H, but reaches Z long before him; she is the best refutation of Euclid's claims that the shortest distance between two points is a line which is straight. And, what is apropos to our scene,

when a man says Yes, his meaning is Yes; by No he means No. To a woman Yes and No have quite different significations than this. Not that she means No by Yes. She means something that has a little of No in it and also a little of Yes—something between the two extremes, a locus the mental vision of the male cannot discern. In the regions of these subtle shadings of meaning, of airy indecision, women seem to be most at home, and men most at a loss. If a young woman tells her lover that she wishes never to see him again, he is likely to think that she wishes never to see him again. And he will stay away, taking to bourbon, poetry, or wakeful nights, as his nature dictates. Then, if he meet her by chance a few doleful days later, she will in all likelihood upbraid him for not telephoning this long while, reflecting caustically on the quality of his affection; if bewilderingly he protests, "But you said—!" she will toss her head in annoyance at his slow-wittedness, possibly adding, "And they say you're intelligent!" *

These differences between the mental processes of men and women make for much of the charm of life but for tragedy too. Hamlet has not been allowed to see Ophelia or to hear from her, and now she accuses him of not loving her any longer. Smarting from the wounds of disprized love, he cannot believe his ears. Is it possible she can pretend to be speaking sincerely? Dare she accuse him of renouncing their love?

♫ Ha, ha! Are you honest?

(The word had more connotations in Shakespeare's day. The line also implies: If you can, knowing what you have done to me, speak this way, are you really as virtuous and chaste as you look?) Her accusation has thrown him off, and bitterness intrudes into his tone. You are beautiful, he exclaims, and therefore dangerous, and if you have any honesty in you,

* We are aware that some ultra-feminists (should they not be called "masculists"?) will be indignant at the imputation of any differences between men and women—unless the differences are adduced to prove the superiority of women. Nature, nonetheless, continues to behave as though there were differences. Completely agreeable to equal rights for women, we yet cry with that gallant French senator, "*Vive la différence!*"

your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty . . . For the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd, than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his * likeness.

Hamlet is angry now, but chiefly with himself. He is lashing himself for not remembering what her treatment of him has been, for having allowed himself to be ensnared by her apparent innocence, the maiden holily engaged in her orisons.

Terrified at his change of tone, which she does not understand—his reaction is so much unanticipated by her, so far from her hopes!—she begins to weep, and tries confusedly to fathom his words. His bitterness increasing, her only refuge is in her tears. Seeing which, Hamlet is of a mind to construe them as hypocritical too. Now for the first time he talks with irony, shooting at her:

This was sometime a paradox.

Oh, but of course, of course—he means to say—you do not catch my meaning! You *will* play the injured innocent to the last, won't you? Then he adds with all the hurt of thwarted love:

I did love you once.

Confounded, disappointed, unable to help herself, she sobs:

Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Like most men, he cannot bear to see the girl he loves in tears, no matter how unjust or unreasonable she has been. Hamlet, naturally, guesses Polonius' part in the straining of their relationship, though he has no way of telling how loyal or disloyal her heart may be to himself. It is all too involved; he knows he cannot count on her rebellion against her father, and is therefore no less bitter. The case seems hopeless. He will make it easier for her, at least, by shouldering the blame and himself disclaiming love for her. Partly out of wounded pride, partly out of pity for her, he murmurs:

You should not have believed me . . . I loved you not.

* its.

With no thought of the agony she has been causing him, sunk in her own unhappiness, she takes his words in their literal sense:

I was the more deceived.

Her tears drain him of his anger. He has only overwhelming pity for her, but knows not how to help her. Blindly male, he would require some small sign that she desires his love; the pathetic hint she has just given him has been completely misread by his masculine self-absorption. He knows only that he has been patently rejected, and he has compassion for her inability to stand up against the forces working on her.

In this mood he bids her flee the world and her corrupting environment. Why should she cooperate in continuing the propagation of the vile human race? Better for her to enter a convent. He is himself honest, as men go, yet he knows himself, as representative of the species, to be capable of the most hideous of crimes.

{ We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.*

*It is here that Wilson's theory (that Hamlet overheard Polonius scheming for this interview) leads him, with the most honest intent, to an interpretation that is downright revolting. Because there are extant a few examples of the usage of the word *nunnery* in Elizabethan slang to mean "whore house," Wilson advances the idea that Hamlet is here bidding Ophelia join a house of ill fame. Because, he says, Hamlet is convinced that Ophelia has agreed to trap him, he comes "very near to calling Ophelia a prostitute to her face."⁷⁸ Sad to relate, none of Wilson's suggestions has been more enthusiastically endorsed by Shakespearean scholars than his glossing of this word. Everywhere it is now considered established fact that such is the meaning of word and passage. *The Oxford Dictionary* does list the word as a cant term for "a house of ill fame" for 1593 and 1617.⁷⁹ But its meaning in the familiar sense of "a convent" or religious house for nuns goes back to 1275. *The Oxford Dictionary* lists it as so used in 1290, 1305, 1330, 1386, 1389, 1425, 1440, 1450, 1470, 1483, 1523, 1538, 1548, 1550, 1571, and 1577; and the quotation under 1602 to illustrate the same meaning quite properly is our line from *Hamlet*.⁸⁰ With such an impressive record the word in all conscience may be thought to have been used by Shakespeare in this

These words have the ring of a bitter-sorrowful-pitying farewell.

But suddenly Hamlet asks,

Where's your father?

Clearly, when Hamlet asks that, he must know that Polonius is within earshot. Yet, an unbiased reading of all that has preceded this question makes it equally clear that nothing Hamlet said until now shows any awareness of his being overheard. (If Wilson's theory were correct, indeed, and Hamlet did know of the eavesdroppers all the time, "Where's your father?" must have been one of the first remarks he would have addressed to Ophelia, not, as it is, one of the last.)

The Barrymore production presented this moment as Shakespeare must have intended it. Hamlet's "Go thy ways to a nunnery" was rightly interpreted as a farewell. After it, Hamlet abruptly turned away from the weeping Ophelia and began to leave the stage. Now, in that production the background of this scene was designed as a series of massive columns; behind one of them Claudius stood concealed, behind another, Polonius. During Hamlet's discourse with Ophelia, Polonius had intermittently been peeking out from behind his column to see what was going on—a piece of business entirely in keeping with his character. This time Hamlet's sudden move to leave caught Polonius unprepared. He bobbed quickly back again, but not quickly enough to escape Hamlet's catching a glimpse of him; moreover, a few inches of Polonius' robe lay unretrieved along the base of the pillar. In a flash, Hamlet looked to Ophelia (who was unaware of what had passed), back to the column,

normal sense too. There is not one solid reason which rules out that likelihood.

Before Wilson, when the word was understood to mean "a convent," the reasons assigned for Hamlet's advice have been quaint; most critics, of course, have resorted to real or assumed madness as the explanation. But Adams, whose Hamlet in his "sick, melancholy brain" thinks that Claudius has designs upon Ophelia's virginity, thus paraphrases the line quoted above: "Believe no man. All men are bent on seducing women. So do not believe the next man—Claudius—when he tells you he loves you, for assuredly he will be trying to deceive you." ⁸¹

back to Ophelia again, and then in perfect fury shouted, "Where's your father?" It was a difficult piece of directorial timing, executed to perfection.

It would seem that until Mr. Gielgud adopted Professor Wilson's suggestions it was fairly traditional to stage the scene as Barrymore did.⁸² The conception certainly was a creditable adaptation of the situation as it must have been staged in the Elizabethan theater. Polonius, concealed behind the curtains of the inner stage, would, one conceives, being Polonius, have thrust his head through the openings of the cloth now and again, would have been a little too late in withdrawing it on Hamlet's sudden move to exit, and might easily have not had time to pull back the skirts of his robe after him. It is precisely the self-assured *gaucherie* you would expect of Polonius.

Now Hamlet is enraged indeed, and it is in a rage that the rest of his words are addressed to Ophelia. The question he puts to her he little looks to be granted an honest answer to now. Spiritless, browbeaten Ophelia dares not tell the truth, and mumbles, "At home, my lord." Hamlet's fury sweeps to its apex, but because of that admixture of pride and vanity without which no man seems able to breathe, it is probably a fury largely directed at himself. At first he had been trapped into looking upon her as though she were a saint; then her return of the gifts portrayed her as a flirt; but his bitterness over that he had allowed to dissolve at the spectacle of her tears; and when he was just now about to leave her, it was with great pity for her. What a fool he has been! How he has permitted himself to be victimized by his love of her! How he has played into the hands of her dotard father!

First it is to the old man that he directs his insults, letting him know he is now aware of his hiding place:

Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool
nowhere but in's own house!

And he turns to go with a savage, "Farewell!" Poor Ophelia, ignorant of Hamlet's discovery and unable to account for the violent change in his voice from his sorrowing "Go thy ways," is now certain he is mad, and, calling upon the heavens to help him, weeps more bitterly than ever. Her tears now only evoke his cold wrath, and he

returns to pour his anger over her. It is in a far different tone that he repeats, "Get thee to a nunnery." With another farewell he moves off, but comes back—the lines powerfully mirror his complete exacerbation—to spit out:

Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them.

Once more he begins to tear away ("To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell!"); once more Ophelia invokes the heavenly powers to restore him to sanity. All this is to him undiluted hypocrisy—her tears, her pretending to think him mad, her calling upon the heavens for help—all this nauseates him as being so much unconvincing display, and he comes back for the last time to tell her so. He knows enough about female deception:

God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp and nick-name God's creatures.

I'll have no more of it! he cries, it is too infuriating! Finally, he calls out to whoever may be concealed behind the hangings:

I say, we will have no more marriages. Those that are married already, all but *one*, shall live!

and dashes out.

Not a syllable of what he has said has upon it any marks of madness. Once aware of Polonius' presence, however, Hamlet was no more capable of considering Ophelia's dilemma than he was of being fair to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from the moment they became treacherous in his eyes. To be evasive with him is to be guilty of whatever his intuitive nature suspects. But much as we pity Ophelia her incapacity, we do not blame Hamlet. That she chooses to obey her father rather than be just to her lover, wins more sympathy for him than for herself. Even the younger, innocent, inexperienced Juliet would rather have heard that her father, mother, and Tybalt were all dead than Romeo banished (*Romeo and Juliet*, III, ii, 114-125).

*Why is Hamlet's going to England
mentioned several times?*

Shakespeare's reasons are purely dramatic. The first time Claudius mentions it is after he emerges from eavesdropping on Hamlet and Ophelia (III, i, 177):

he shall with speed to England,
For the demand of our neglected tribute—

perhaps a change of air will improve Hamlet's health and temper. Here Claudius apparently has no more nefarious intentions than to remove his nephew from the court awhile. He is strong-minded enough to resist believing that Hamlet could possibly know about the murder. He may hope that Hamlet's hostility is owing only to the marriage. In all events, a vacation from home might bring back a more agreeable nephew from England. When we hear the King's plan, we feel fairly certain that Hamlet would refuse to go.

The second time Hamlet's going to England is mentioned is when Claudius, having revealed himself as a murderer during "The Murder of Gonzago," commissions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to get Hamlet to accompany them to England (III, iii, 1-7). This time we are convinced that Hamlet will never agree to leave Denmark now that his line of action is taking direction.

Why have these references been made? For a powerful reason. When Hamlet plunges his sword through the cloth into Polonius' body (III, iv, 24)—the climax of the plot—the full impact of this tragic error comes upon us as we realize: Now Hamlet will have to go to England! He himself quickly estimates the consequences, when he says to Gertrude,

I must to England (200)

and a few lines further mutters over Polonius' corpse:

This man shall set me packing (211).

His rash deed has ruined his revenge, and delivered him into the hands of his foe. The King can order him to England—now with murderous purposes, of course:

Hamlet, this deed of thine, for thine especial safety,
 . . . must send thee hence
 With fiery quickness; therefore prepare thyself . . .

In Hamlet's brief but acrimonious answer to this, the point is grimly and finally driven home:

HAM. For England?

KING. Ay, Hamlet.

HAM. Good!

KING. So it is, if thou knew'st our purposes.

HAM. I see a cherub that sees them.

IV, iii, 42-50

*What is the meaning of the word "idle"
 in Hamlet's line: "I must be idle" (III, ii, 96)?*

Just before "The Murder of Gonzago" is to be given, Hamlet is busy talking to Horatio and enlisting his aid. Sometime after his interview with the Ghost, Hamlet has told his friend of the Ghost's account of the late King's death; now he asks Horatio to fasten upon Claudius' face during the performance with all his powers of perception. If the King's hidden guilt does not "unkennel" itself, it is a damned spirit which they have seen. Horatio pledges his full cooperation. With a flourish, the Court begins to enter. Seeing the King and Queen approaching, Hamlet leaves his friend's side with:

I must be idle.

This has become, for no reason, a crucial line among commentators. To support the theory of assumed madness, the word *idle* is usually glossed to mean "crazy"—that is, Hamlet is supposed to be telling Horatio that he must now "act the madman again, since the others are coming." Thus Kittredge.⁸³ Wilson says that the words mean "I must assume my antic disposition."⁸⁴ * Even André Gide was hoodwinked by the commentaries to render the line in his translation of the play in this bald fashion:

A présent je dois faire l'idiot.⁸⁶

* This distortion goes back to the mid-nineteenth century when Delius and Staunton gave it that interpretation.⁸⁵

Our own contribution to the discussion is revolutionary: we insist that by *idle* Shakespeare meant "idle," i.e., "unoccupied or inactive." His plays are running over with lines in which the word is used in this modern sense.*

When Hamlet says to Horatio "I must be idle. Get you a place" he simply means that he does not wish Claudius to find him in close conference with his friend; it is important that the King have no suspicions of any kind, and therefore he wishes Claudius to find him being merely idle, unoccupied, not up to anything, before "The Murder of Gonzago" begins. It is that simple.

No doubt the perverted glossing of *idle* is a product of the scholars' trouble with the conversation which now follows with the King. In it, they have decided, Hamlet proceeds to talk sheer non-

* Thus, for a brief sampling: 1. Othello, in recounting his history to Desdemona, had occasion to speak of vast caves and deserts *idle*. (*Othello*, I, iii, 140)—these deserts were certainly not crazy! 2. Ford says to Mistress Page concerning his wife: *As idle as she may hang together for want of company* (*Merry Wives*, III, ii, 13). 3. Menenius speaks of how the "body's members" rebelled against the belly for remaining *I' the midst of the body, idle and unactive* (*Coriolanus*, I, i, 102). 4. In the same play Valeria comes to coax Virgilia out of her house with: *Come, lay aside your stitchery. I must have you play the idle housewife with me this afternoon* (I, iii, 75-6)—she is not inviting her to play the lunatic! 5. During his quarrel with Cassius, Brutus says scoffingly to him that his threats *pass by me as the idle wind* (*Julius Caesar*, IV, iii, 68).

The only example scholars have been able to cite to justify glossing *idle* as "crazy" is when Goneril speaks to her steward of Lear as:

Idle old man

That still would manage those authorities

That he hath given away!

Lear, I, iii, 16-18

This is as unjustifiable a perversion of the meaning⁸⁷ as the attempt in *Hamlet*. Lear's mind has not yet begun to collapse—he has not yet had any contention with his viper daughters. Goneril is merely shrewishly accusing her father of having nothing better to do with his time than make a nuisance of himself. There is no example in Shakespeare of a use of the word *idle* to mean "crazy." It meant "doing nothing, unemployed," as long ago as the year 950.⁸⁸

sense. As a matter of fact nowhere in the play does he speak with livelier and more dramatic pertinancy. Claudius, of course, does not follow Hamlet's meanings—because the King has no notion of Hamlet's purposes in presenting the play. The Prince speaks to him in double meanings, the real significance of which is clear only to himself—and to us, if we are alert. But it is absurd to pretend that this double-talk is a manifestation of pretended lunacy, when everything said is so powerfully cogent and apropos.

Anxious not to raise any suspicions in the King's mind, Hamlet, one would suppose, would try to be gracious and agreeable with him—particularly since Claudius obviously takes the invitation to the play as a gesture of friendliness. But Hamlet cannot pretend friendship for this man; more dangerously, he cannot refrain from relishing his private knowledge with elaborate sarcasm. The King asks, politely, how things are with him:

How fares our cousin * Hamlet?

Hamlet feigns that the word *fare* was intended in the sense of *eat*, and replies that he is doing very well indeed, that like the chameleon—as it was then thought—he can live on nothing but air:

I eat the air, promise-crammed.

Like the chameleon, he means privately, I am sustained by the air—and the air just now is crammed with the promise of my unmasking your guilt.† He continues:

You cannot feed capons so.

Claudius treats him, Hamlet means, encircling him with diplomatic politeness, as though he had lost his manhood. The promise in the

* relative.

† Moberly: "The King had promised him that he should be next to himself; but Hamlet ought to have been first in the realm."⁸⁹ Kirtledge: Hamlet's line is intended to give weight to the belief "that disappointment about the kingship is the cause of his insanity."⁹⁰ Wilson: "'I am tired,' says Hamlet, 'of being fed with mere promises of the succession.'" ⁹¹ This is indeed pulling things out of the air. The issue of the succession to the crown has not even been mentioned thus far in the play.

air when fulfilled may soon prove to Claudius that Hamlet is not the emasculated creature he seems to think. The King, following none of these subtleties, replies:

I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet; these words are not mine.

Hamlet's answer, No, nor mine now, means, of course, that now that the words have been uttered, they no longer belong to him. But it is possible he means more than that. Were the pleasures of sarcasm worth the risk he has taken? It has surely been impolitic of him to say this much. Even if the King has not understood, he may very well have begun to feel a threat behind Hamlet's words—and it is above all important that Claudius be not put on guard right now. It may be because Hamlet perceives he has said too much that he turns his back upon the King and begins to tease Polonius.

Why do the players present "The Murder of Gonzago" in pantomime before beginning to enact it? (III, ii, 145)

The reason is, again, purely dramaturgical. Shakespeare's scenario will require Claudius' staggering out in the *middle* of the performance, if he is to prove to Hamlet and Horatio that he is a murderer. But if the performance is thus to be cut short, how is the audience to know what in the play unkennels the King's guilt? It was to provide the audience with a knowledge of the play's plot, that Shakespeare hit upon the device of a brief dumb-show as a kind of short cut. The audience must be informed of the play's similarity to the Ghost's narrative.

How is it that Claudius, having seen in the dumb-show what the plot of the play is to be, allows the dialogue to proceed?

This ought to appear a hopelessly unimaginative query, but it is a matter that has been endlessly worried over by commentators—with some truly astonishing answers.* In Mr. Olivier's movie the

* Greg, deducing that Claudius remains calm during the pantomime, concludes that his lack of agitation exonerates Claudius as a murderer; the Ghost's story was not a message from the other world but a "figment

director apparently felt it to be a serious difficulty, which he solved by omitting all of the dialogue portion, and keeping Claudius busy kissing Gertrude's hand, so that he missed the first part of the pantomime.

Let us consider the scene from the point of view of stage performance. How would Claudius, unprepared for Hamlet's trap, humanly react? Naturally, to be gracious as a response to Hamlet's "friendly" invitation to the performance, he will watch with attention. Is it psychologically acceptable that in one instant he should note the similarity of the little play to his own misdeeds, and rise, scream, and rush from the room? That is what the posing of the question we are considering implies. If it were so acted, the audience would never grasp the import of his reaction; for dramatic effectiveness, it is necessary that Claudius' terror should mount by degrees until it reaches the breaking point.

That grading of his reactions is also true to the psychological facts. Let us not forget that the dumb-show is very brief, that it takes but a few minutes to present. As it begins, Claudius watches it with no more concern than he would observe any other play. There is nothing in the demonstrations of love between the Player King and Player Queen that need disturb him. Only in the middle of the dumb show does the Poisoner enter.

It is when the Poisoner "pours the poison in the King's ears" that Claudius will start. Quickly he will look about him—Gertrude and the courtiers are calmly observing the play (Gertrude knows nothing about any poisoning); next he will glance quickly at Hamlet—who, all as quick, is pretending to be elaborately absorbed in the performance. No, Claudius will tell himself, I must be mad to think there is anything in this but coincidence. How could Hamlet possibly have staged this to unnerve me? Not he, not anyone in Denmark (except, perhaps, one other) knows my crime. It is fantastic

of Hamlet's brain."⁹² To answer this Wilson wrote a whole book which intends to prove that Claudius is unaffected by the dumb show only because he is not watching it: at the time he is busy talking to Polonius and Gertrude.⁹³ Gray thinks Claudius does not realize Hamlet's connection with the performance.⁹⁴ Lawrence decides that the dumb-show is an artistic blunder on the part of the author, since it warns the King; he concludes that Shakespeare did not write that part of the play.⁹⁵

that I allow myself to find a special meaning in this play. I must not be stupid. This is only a play.

Claudius is a strong man, and he soon realizes that, whatever may be the import of his nephew's invitation to this piece, all he has to do is sit tight and say nothing until the play is over. It is simply a matter of enduring until the end of the performance. That, he feels, he can manage. Before he has reached this conclusion in his thoughts, the brief pantomime is over. He looks about again, at Hamlet, at Gertrude, and the court. Everything seems in serene accustomed order.

Hamlet, on his part, perceives that this is no weak adversary. The King, whatever his reactions, is contriving to keep a diplomatic silence. Out of the corner of his eye Hamlet has noted, of course, Claudius' searching looks. This is a good beginning, Hamlet thinks, and to cover the interval between the dumb-show and the opening of the play's dialogue, he smothers his excitement by concentrating on Ophelia, and thus somewhat reassures Claudius. The fact that she can ask,

Will they tell us what this show meant?

indicates that the pantomime has been so brief that no one in the room has completely digested it. (The audience, however, having heard the Ghost's narrative, has absorbed it rapidly enough.) Because of its brevity, Claudius might very well be asking himself whether he is not allowing his fancy to run riot in supposing that the play has been meant to afflict him. Hamlet is busy with Ophelia; the rest are all absorbed in the entertainment. He will know better, he decides, as the dialogue unfolds. In the meantime, he braces himself; he has only to control himself until it is all over.

As the dialogue of "The Murder of Gonzago" proceeds, Hamlet realizes that Claudius will never break unless he can force him into speech. Once he can make the King break the dam of silence, Hamlet is sure he can cause Claudius to give himself away. What, moreover, is the meaning of the Queen's placidity? How much does she really know? Hamlet must do something to make them both speak. He feels Claudius' eyes studying him intensely during the dialogue, and knows the King is overwrought. Ostentatiously ignoring him, Hamlet looks straight at Gertrude, and shoots at her:

Madam, how like you this play?

Quite impersonally she replies with the criticism:

The lady protests too much, methinks.

(The touch is perfect. Sentimentalists like Gertrude never see themselves as they are: if they did, they could not bear to live.)

But Hamlet's arrow has lodged where he meant to aim it—in the King's bosom. Claudius gathers from Hamlet's question that his own growing alarm may be perhaps fully justified. Despite himself his anxiety unseals his lips; the tension is too much for him, and before he knows what he is doing he is asking Hamlet:

Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in 't?

This is what Hamlet has been waiting for. For the first time he looks directly at the King and cries:

No, no! They do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' th' world!

Now Claudius is certain. By some miracle Hamlet has found out his secret. But how? He holds on to the sides of his throne to master himself, and once more, despite himself, as in a hideous nightmare, he hears himself speak. Exultantly, Hamlet now speaks with lightning rapidity. The King's nerves are overstrained: he must break them. Also, he must fill in the time until the Player Poisoner enters; the performance must not be stopped. Hamlet gives the screw several powerful new turns: his answer to Claudius is brilliantly sinister. The play? It's called "The Mouse-trap." How? By figure of speech. But it's a story of murder done in *Vienna* (not Denmark!). The victim's name was *Gonzago* (not Hamlet!); his queen's *Baptista* (not Gertrude!). With a little patience your Majesty will see how it works out. It's a knavish piece of work. But your Majesty and the rest of us—we have free souls—why should we be disturbed by it?

The Poisoner enters. Here Hamlet counts on the King's breaking. As the actor prepares to speak, Hamlet looks away from Claudius, delivers some rapid jests at Ophelia, and bids the actor plunge into his speech. When the Poisoner pours the venom into the Player King's ears, Claudius can bear it no longer, and begins to crack. Knowing he has exposed himself to Hamlet, he rises. Wildly, Hamlet

spits out at him anything that comes into his head, in the hope that Claudius will publicly damn himself.

It is Polonius who stops the performance, and perhaps thus saves the King from overtly blurting out the truth. Why should it be he who comes to the King's rescue? Brokenly, the King staggers from his throne, calls for lights, and stumbles out. His self-mastery, though not enough to conceal the truth from Hamlet, has protected him from saying anything incriminating in the presence of his wife or the courtiers.*

*Why does the Ghost re-appear
in Gertrude's closet? (III, iv, 103)*

In a rash fit, Hamlet has killed Polonius. He turns from the corpse to speak harshly to his mother:

Leave wringing of your hands. Peace! Sit you down,
And let me wring your heart . . .

As he proceeds in his castigation of her, there is an air of desperate-ness in what he says, as of a man fighting at the last ditch. While he speaks, he is aware that he has just committed an irremediable error—a fact he eventually puts into words—and he hurries on as though he has no time to waste. As he talks, all his hatred for Claudius, all the poison engendered in him by her marriage, begins to spill out. The fury of his words momentarily forces Gertrude to confront herself. Seeing that his attack is making some impression on her ("O Hamlet, speak no more!"), he renews his furious denunciation of Claudius as a pickpocket who stole the unguarded crown. Hamlet is at the apex of his rage when the Ghost appears.

Usually it has been assumed that the Ghost's purpose is to spur Hamlet out of his delay. With a procrastination theory in mind, a hasty reading of Hamlet's lines would seem to lend weight to such an interpretation:

* In the Olivier movie the court, more interested in watching Claudius than the play, seemed to understand the King's guilt too. The courtiers became infected with Claudius' fright, and general pandemonium ensued. To complete the riot, Hamlet seized a torch and scared the entire assemblage out of the chamber.

Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
The important acting of your dread command?

But we have seen no procrastination, no delay—and now that the play is much more than half over it is too late to look for it. When Hamlet accuses himself as “lapsed in time and passion” he is giving two reasons why he has failed to carry out the Ghost’s “dread command”:

1. Circumstance (“time”) * has made it difficult to bring Claudius to justice, the conditions with which he has had to cope having impeded honorable vengeance;

2. His having allowed *passion* to take his reason prisoner, when he rashly killed Polonius, has thwarted his cause and canceled all the gains made on this very night.

The Ghost’s answer is in but two lines:

this visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose—

* In Shakespeare *time* often means “circumstance,” as Wilson, oddly enough, has pointed out.⁹⁶ E.g.,

I know love is begun by time

Hamlet, IV, vii, 112;

The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness
And time to speak it in.

Tempest, II, i, 137-8;

O time most accurst,

’Mongst all foes that a friend should be the worst!

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, V, iv, 71-2;

We shall write to you,
As time and our concernings shall importune.

Measure for Measure, I, i, 56-7.

And *lapsed* is used by Shakespeare to mean “arrested”:

only myself stood out;
For which; if I be lapsed in this place,
I shall pay dear.

Twelfth Night, III, iii, 35-7.

This is, apparently, the only other time Shakespeare uses the word.

words which, if read carelessly, would seem (and are so construed) to reprove Hamlet for causeless delay. But viewing them—as commentators have never viewed them—with an eye to the image the poet had in mind, they mean exactly the opposite of the accepted notion. Hamlet's purpose has become "almost blunted." The figure is of a sword or blade. How do our knives become blunted? From too little or too much use? Certainly, as every housewife could tell, from overuse. The Ghost accuses Hamlet not of having done too little but of having done far too much. He is referring not to his son's mental attitude, but specifically to the murder of Polonius—an act which, by excessive use of his sword, has blunted the edge of Hamlet's revenge. To recapitulate: Hamlet asks, Do you come to chide me because I have allowed my emotions to put fetters on my revenge? The Ghost replies, Yes, you have dulled the blade of vengeance by your thoughtless use of your sword.

There remains the fundamental question as to why Shakespeare caused the Ghost to appear at this particular juncture. If his purpose was, as is universally assumed, to have the Ghost jog Hamlet into action after unreasonable delay, why just at this time? Why in Gertrude's chamber, since the Ghost chooses not to be seen or heard by her? Obviously there must be some other reason, and if we remember that this is a play it is not hard to find. After the folly of killing Polonius, Hamlet was driven into desperation by that error—as his lines eloquently show—that desperation expressing itself in mounting violence against his mother. Earlier tonight he has vowed to speak daggers to her but to use none—vowed it because he was well aware how easy it would be to use them—but after the murder of the old man he approaches steadily to the brink of new folly and violence. At the apex of Hamlet's fury, as we have said, the Ghost *intervenes* to warn Hamlet and to calm him. He has permitted himself enough violence in this room, and it is of this that the Ghost has reminded him. In another moment might he not have done violence to Gertrude too? The rest of the Ghost's brief speech (his only one in this scene) is intended to pacify the overwrought Prince, and bring him to deal more reasonably with the Queen:

But, look, amazement on thy mother sits.
O, step between her and her fighting soul.

Conceit * in weakest bodies strongest works.
 Speak to her, Hamlet.

Nothing in the play is more touching than the loving concern for this unworthy woman which the Ghost has carried even beyond the grave. Ironically, even with his superterrestrial wisdom, the spirit knows little about Gertrude. She is indeed in a fit of amazement, but not (as the Ghost supposes) because of contrition over her past guilt.

Having decided that Hamlet is mad when he, at his father's behest, speaks his first gentle words to her,

How is it with you, lady?

she pityingly asks him,

Alas, how is 't with *you*
 That you do bend your eye on vacancy
 And with the incorporal air do hold discourse?

In anguish, as yet unaware that she neither beholds nor hears his father, Hamlet points out to her that pale form, whose very looks and cause would be enough to make stones capable of feeling for him. And to the Ghost he cries to cease bending his gaze on him lest pity for his father

convert
 My stern effects; then what I have to do
 Will want *true color*; tears perchance for blood.

These lines have never been correctly explained, perhaps for the reason that it has been forgotten that the word *color* in Shakespeare's day (and for two centuries earlier) meant "allegeable ground or reason." ⁹⁷ It was used in that sense earlier in the same act by Polonius, in talking to Ophelia, as he gives her the prayer book (III, i, 45):

That show of such an exercise may color
 Your loneliness.

Such is its meaning when Cleopatra upbraids Antony:

* imagination.

Nay, pray you, seek no color for your going,
But bid farewell and go.

Antony and Cleopatra, I, iii, 32-3

What Hamlet is saying to the Ghost is: Pity for you could easily turn aside the sternness of all I yet must do—I've but to look at you to cast all caution to the winds again, and kill your wicked brother without further ado—then such a premature act would lack the grounds by which I could justify it ("want true color")—and there would be many tears to shed thereafter for the blood that recklessly I should spill.

Hamlet now tries to make his mother see the Ghost as it steals away—but she can see no apparition.*

* There is on (what claims to be) record a statement of what Shakespeare thinks of people like her! A quite amazing, though not at all fascinating, book, *Shakespeare's Revelations* by "Shakespeare's Spirit, through the Medium of his Pen, Sarah Taylor Shattford" (The Torch Press, New York, 1919). The foreword to this compendium, signed:

SHAKESPEARE in Spirit

Through my treasured clairaudient, Sarah; the only medium through whom I, as spirit, have worked at words.

Dictated by the spirit August 14th, 1919

informs us that as regards the reviler of spiritualistic mediums, Shakespeare wishes "here for the rest of time . . . to brand the culprit who defames, underestimates the instrument through which his work is accomplished . . . Avaunt dissembler." (The last phrase bespeaks the author of *Macbeth*!) Among all sorts of things the volume contains a series of maxims, which might have been mouthed by some half-witted cousin of Lear's Fool: "Pigs and sows have no need of gloves." "Poke a hornet's nest if you want to be stung." "The future is just ahead. Today was yesterday. Tomorrow will soon be today" (pp. 12-23). If Shakespeare's prose seems to have undergone an alteration "on the other side," no less can be said of his verse. He seems to have been reading Wordsworth, though without much profit:

"Fourteen summers have passed since I saw England.

These have I counted on my two hands.

Lest you should think I have no hands

Being Shakespeare's shade, then let me say

I have the SAME hands which were mine,

Even those hands defects. [*sic*]" (p. 65)

ACT FOUR

*What lies behind Ophelia's distributing
the flowers in her madness? (IV, v, 175 seq.)*

It is a great pity that the world has abandoned the language of the flowers (though some remnants of it have been kept alive by the enterprise of florists), that charming old convention which attached a special meaning to each variety of bloom; the modern audience in the theater is bound to miss most of the subtlety of this scene, in which Ophelia distributes to Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes the imaginary blossoms which her disordered fancy conceives she has culled.

Lacking Shakespeare's direction, we cannot declare with absolute positiveness the identity of the person Ophelia addresses in each of her phrases. But a knowledge of the meaning of each of the flowers she has to offer and of the history of the King, Queen, and

He has, however, kept up with the times, as in his poem "Democracy":

"A land all free whose people rule themselves;
A Nation all united in one cause . . ." (p. 33)

Since some of these compositions were dictated in New York, we need not be surprised at Shakespeare's "The Yankee's Prayer," in which a World War I soldier laments having to kill a "Hun" in battle, and concludes:

"If I must kill my brotherman
For this world's liberty.
I'll do my duty like a man;
As every soldier must—
Then, as we say in the U. S. A.:
'In God We Trust.'" (p. 358)

(There is something Elizabethan in this punctuation!) But to come back to the association which reminded us of this volume, Gertrude's blindness to the Ghost, hearken to Shakespeare's spirit on "Ghosts":

"The wraith of death men speak of sneeringly,—
Recalling in a joke its sight or name;
But when they find these ghosts are just as they,
They'll ponder long the way through which they came."
(p. 35)

Laertes, makes it possible to be fairly accurate. To Laertes she gives rosemary (for remembrances) and pansies (for thoughts—the name of the flower itself having come from the French *pensée*, “thought”). To Claudius she offers fennel (for flatterers), columbine (for cuckoldry, because of its horn-like shape), and rue (for sorry memories). She sets aside some rue for herself too. To Gertrude too she gives rue, but with this qualification:

O, you must wear *your* rue with a difference.

She also gives her a daisy (for dissemblers), and concludes that she would like to give her some violets too (for faithfulness) but there are none to give, since her father died.* In each case her choices are wonderfully appropriate. The mysterious and sudden death of their father has given Laertes occasion for much thought (pansies) and remembrance (rosemary). (Rosemary, by the way, was in use at Elizabethan funerals.) The King has flattered (fennel) many during the late King's lifetime—Gertrude, Polonius, and the courtiers; he has been an adulterer (columbine); for that reason and even more because he is a murderer, he has his fill of sorry memories (rue). Ophelia herself has sorry memories (rue) of Hamlet and her father. But those (rue) of the Queen are different from her own because Gertrude was not a victim but a sinner, and different from those of Claudius because Gertrude was innocent of murder. The Queen, as

* Naturally, the critics have had a merry time with this passage. Staunton: She confounds Laertes with Hamlet and therefore gives the rosemary to him.⁹⁸ Steevens: *You must wear your rue with a difference* refers “to the rules of heraldry, where the younger brothers of a family bear the same arms *with a difference*, or mark of distinction.”⁹⁹ (Obviously Steevens thinks the remark addressed to Claudius, not Gertrude.) Dyce: “Does Ophelia mean that the daisy is herself?”¹⁰⁰ Kittredge: She may give the daisy to the King or Queen.¹⁰¹ Wilson: She keeps the pansies for herself.¹⁰²

No one seems to think, with us, that Ophelia first gives rue to the King, then sets some aside for herself, and then offers the rest to the Queen. But the text, as will be seen, justifies our reading. We prefer, moreover, to think of her as addressing each of the three present in turn, one at a time—a more charming stage action than if she kept whirling around, back and forth, from one to the other.

where adulter
 an adulteress, was a dissembler (daisy) to her first husband. As for the violets of faithfulness, they withered when her father died; Hamlet's murder of Polonius, which has put an eternal bar between him and her, and his going away, have put an end to all the faithfulness the world held for her.

Does Ophelia recognize each of the three as she bestows her floral gifts? At the moment her clouded mind is clear enough as to whom she is addressing—else there were no possibility of the very pointedness of the flowers' meanings.

But the most interesting question of all has never been raised. How does it happen that Ophelia knows all these things—Claudius' treachery, his and Gertrude's adultery, and the murder itself? In the twentieth century, with our greater knowledge of psychological processes, we are in a better position than our predecessors to appreciate the depth of Shakespeare's insight. Ophelia's references to the past of Gertrude and Claudius seem to come from the darkest recesses within her, as from a hidden knowledge that she has never dared allow to pass her lips. We may well imagine that a girl permitted as few liberties as she has been would in Polonius's household be treated as though she were not there during the discussion of the world's affairs, her father and brother fully confident that what she heard was safe with her. She has heard talk of Gertrude's adultery, she has even overheard talk about the murder! If Polonius could know of that crime, he must have been somewhat a partner in it. It is this passage which satisfies us that Claudius was indebted to him in the murder of the late King.

As for Ophelia, what a glimpse we now have of the frustrated life of the poor girl—of all that she had heard and was not supposed to know—of all the terror and misery of her thoughts that she could never express! If we were impatient with her earlier, we can only have the greatest pity for her now.

ACT FIVE

*Why did Shakespeare introduce
 the gravediggers into his play?*

The roles of the two gravediggers were enacted by two clowns in Shakespeare's company. The public liked to have clowns in plays,

and it is only too obvious to observe that here they are being used for comic relief. All of which is true and well known. But it does not explain why Shakespeare waited until the last act to bring the clowns in.*

His reason, we believe, was predominantly an esthetic one. For the first three acts of the tragedy the tone of this play has been achieved through an interweaving of the tragic and the comic. The comic has been of two kinds: the intellectual, witty toying with words and ideas of Hamlet; and the broadly humorous befuddled meddling and slow-wittedness of Polonius. With the death of Polonius the source of the latter kind of comedy has been removed from the play. In the hurry of the brief fourth act, with its rapid succession of scenes, there was no room or need for broader comic effects. But now Shakespeare is faced with the esthetic problem of maintaining the tone established everywhere else in the play.

The problem is perhaps more clearly seen with reference to painting. No skilled painter would be content to paint the portrait of a lady in which his subject wore a ruby brooch upon her dress and allow that small area of red to be the only one in his picture. Such a solitary patch of vivid color would be enough to ruin any canvas. To bring the brooch into tone with the rest of the work, he would possibly give hints of its color in various places on her robe, and would almost certainly blend ruby-red into the background of the picture.

So Shakespeare, having affirmed the broadly comic as part of the tone of his play, must find new sources for it now that Polonius

* On a rainy night the reader might be diverted by a perusal of N. J. Symons's psychoanalytical interpretation of the graveyard scene, in which all references are given specifically sexual meanings. It is not possible to quote extensively from this engaging monograph, as one is tempted to do, because book publishers do not appear to allow themselves the license of vocabulary accorded the psychoanalytical journals. But to give some idea of this exegesis, suffice it to report that according to it: the "digging" is a sexual symbol; the first skull is symbolic for Gertrude; the first and all the other skulls also are symbolic for Hamlet's father; Hamlet himself is the "real gravedigger" (in a sexually symbolic sense); Ophelia is identified in Hamlet's unconscious with his mother because of his "repressed thought that both women were 'bitches,'" and in *my Lady Worm* Hamlet schizophrenically "equates Gertrude-Ophelia as 'worm.'" 103

cannot supply it. And for his fifth act he invents a new source for each of its two scenes: in the first we have the gravediggers, in the next the absurd Osric. Thus the play will continue to its conclusion without any dilution of the established tone.

His solution of the problem is admirable beyond praise. With his incomparable power for making many virtues out of one necessity, he not only maintains the tone he has set, but also contrives to vary the broad comic effect itself. Polonius, the gravediggers, and Osric is each a species of clown in his own right; but there is a wide range of difference in their clownishness. In the case of the gravediggers, like the drunken porter in *Macbeth* and the Fool in *Lear*, they deepen the tragic effect. We laugh at their idiocies, but as we laugh a chill goes up and down our spines, and our sense of horror is augmented. While we are diverted at their stupidities, we are aghast that they can be so vulgarly callous to the awful solemnity of death, that they can jest in its presence, that anyone can sing a silly ditty while he is going about such work.

But it is Horatio, with his omnipresent good sense, who reminds us that, since we cannot dispense with gravediggers, we cannot demand that they be squeamish about their employment:

Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

V, i, 75

*How should the scene of the
fencing match be staged?*

This is a matter of considerable moment. Were the King not to be impeded by the table before him and his distance from the fencers, Gertrude's life need not be forfeit. In the Elizabethan theater, the King and Queen as they took their places in all likelihood sat upon their thrones in the inner stage, and before them would have stood a table upon which the stoups of wine were set. (The inner stage was the only part of the stage that could be curtained off; consequently it was only there, while the curtains were closed, that thrones or any furniture could be prepared for an ensuing scene.) The match itself took place on the stage proper. Before the match begins, Hamlet handsomely apologizes to Laertes before the whole court (V, ii, 237 seq.). Who but a man with the blood of Polonius

flowing in his veins could resist the honorableness of amends like these:

Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.

—and then and there renounce his vile plot against the other's life? But Laertes evades a direct answer. Osric, in charge of the foils, begins to distribute them. He must surely have been instructed to make certain that Laertes procures the envenomed, sharpened rapier. To help him at the moment of choice, Claudius deliberately distracts Hamlet's attention from the proceedings by engaging him in conversation:

KING. Cousin Hamlet,
You know the wager?
HAM. Very well, my lord.
Your Grace hath laid the odds o' the weaker side.

(Here again Hamlet is speaking with double meaning. The King is backing him in the match, and on the surface Hamlet means to imply that theirs is the weaker side. But in his other meaning, he and the King form opposing sides. Thinking of his coming vengeance, he insinuates—not at all referring to the match—that Claudius' side, which the King imagines must remain triumphant, will soon be seen the weaker, and Hamlet's the stronger. Hamlet is so well pleased to exercise his wit in this private quibble that he pays scant attention to the choice of rapiers.)

It needs only Osric's eye to lead Laertes to the choice of the deadly weapon. Hamlet, apparently, picks the first rapier to hand. Thus at a most critical minute Hamlet is betrayed by the same heedlessness which caused him to kill Polonius. Under normal conditions no fencer would think of examining all the foils to be sure none of them is deadly; but these are not normal conditions. It is catastrophic that Hamlet can have forgot it was Claudius who arranged the match. Claudius announces that to honor his nephew he will throw a fine pearl ("an union") into the wine cup. He drinks to Hamlet's health. The match begins. In the first bout Hamlet scores a hit. See-

ing his nephew doing too well, Claudius wastes no time in slipping the poison into the wine, and sending the goblet down to Hamlet. The tension of this scene is wonderful. Hamlet puts off the cup-bearer with the remark that he wishes first to play the next bout. He scores another hit. The Queen, delighted at his prowess, quits her place in the inner stage to play again the loving mother—this time fatally. She comes to him and affectionately wipes the perspiration from his brow. Then, excited at what appear signs of reciprocated affection in him, she takes the drink from the servant standing by. Claudius cries:

Gertrude, do not drink!

He dares say no more, and she is too far from him to be intercepted. His impulse must be to clear the space between them and seize the goblet—but that would expose him. There is nothing he can do in that flash of time. His machinations have turned against him and rob him of the possession he prizes most, his wife. She insists upon drinking, and then, to our consternation, she offers the cup to Hamlet. He says

I dare not drink yet, madam; by and by.

and we breathe with relief.

Laertes realizes that now there is no time to expend, for the Queen must soon show the effects of the poison. Hamlet has noticed that Laertes has been fencing halfheartedly:

Come, for the third, Laertes; you but dally.

Laertes puts forth his best effort and wounds Hamlet.

The last minutes of the match have elicited a variety of comment and exposition. Samuel Johnson's remark is astonishing: "The exchange of weapons is rather an expedient of necessity than a stroke of art";¹⁰⁴ from which we can only conclude that in Garrick's day the interchange of weapons between Hamlet and Laertes was made to appear an accident—in defiance of common sense and dramatic values. (It is agreeable to report that we have not always seen the business directed that way.) The direction of the First Folio is not very explicit:

In scuffling, they change rapiers.

The attempts of critics to make it more so vary from the quaint to the mad. Seymour thought that Hamlet, disarming Laertes "with a quick and strong parry," courteously hands his own weapon to Laertes while innocently picking up the latter's, and that Laertes has no choice but to accept it.¹⁰⁵ Adams' view is much the same: Hamlet's proffer of his own rapier is an example of the hero's "magnanimous behavior."¹⁰⁶ Tieck was particularly elaborate: The rapiers are kept on the table, according to him; the men choose their weapons, fight for a time, and then return them to the table, conversation occupying "the pause between rounds"; the King commissions Osric or some other hireling to change the position of the rapiers on the table, for Claudius is as anxious to see Laertes dead as he is to destroy his nephew.¹⁰⁷ Elze believed that the interchange of weapons is by accident; both fencers are too much excited to mark which weapon they seize.¹⁰⁸ Tom Taylor had Hamlet throw Laertes a foil "but, by mistake" retain "the one he had disarmed him of."¹⁰⁹ Marquard, finding supernatural influence everywhere in the play, suggests that the interchange is "the work of spirits."¹¹⁰

What all these gentlemen failed to see is that the exchange must be a *deliberate* one on Hamlet's part *because he has been wounded*. Had Laertes been fighting with the usual bated weapon, Hamlet could not have received a cut. Once he feels the sting of the wound, although unaware of the venom on the point of Laertes' rapier, he will in a second realize that he has been treacherously dealt with, and will see to it that he comes into possession of his opponent's rapier.

The conclusion of the match has been presented in many different ways, but we have never seen it done so convincingly as by John Barrymore. Hamlet and Laertes closed, separated; then Laertes, crying

Have at you now!

made a successful lunge and wounded Hamlet lightly on the breast. Hamlet was about to continue the contest, but paused. To his astonishment he felt himself cut. He put his hand to his breast, and it came away with blood upon it. He did not deem the wound more than trivial, but was precipitated into a rage by the realization of foul play, that Laertes' sword was not bated. Now with full fury

he fought with one objective: to beat Laertes' rapier out of his grasp. Claudius, seeing all that had been occurring, tried to stop the match—but he could reach them no more than he could his wife. This is clearly what Shakespeare meant.

With maniacal energy Hamlet beat the foil from Laertes' hand. Laertes stooped to pick it up, but Hamlet quickly put his foot upon it, with elaborate irony offered Laertes his own foil—nobody but John Barrymore could do this to perfection!—and slowly and sardonically grasped the rapier Laertes had been using.

As the fight is renewed with savagery, the Queen falls, faint from the poison, and Hamlet runs Laertes through. Thus the latter dies very quickly, as much from the sword-thrust as from the poison, whereas Hamlet, having been but scratched, dies more slowly from the workings of the venom.

The first to go is the Queen, whose last words are a warning to Hamlet of the drink. Not knowing his minutes are numbered, the Prince leaps at once to the task of vengeance: calling for the doors to be locked, he cries:

{ Treachery! Seek it out!

We suggest, but do not insist, that at this line Hamlet should reach into his doublet to extract the document ordering his death in England, as a prelude to revealing Claudius' guilt. (This would be, of course, a radical innovation—but we feel it may very well have been what Shakespeare meant.) But Laertes' next words prevent his proceeding, for he learns, and begins to feel, that his time is running out:

Hamlet, thou art slain;
No medicine in the world can do thee good,
In thee there is not half an hour of life . . .

325 seq.

There is no time for Hamlet to unearth beginnings. Hearing that the point has been envenomed, Hamlet dashes to the King and stabs him with the deadly weapon.*

* To clear the air, one ought to list here some of the crimes perpetrated by the Olivier movie during the last minutes of the tragedy:

1. When Gertrude drinks of the wine she knows it to be poisoned;

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she calls Hamlet's attention to her drinking so he may observe the consequences; her death by suicide is an act of self-sacrifice to save her son from the envenomed goblet.

2. At Hamlet's line, *Treachery! Seek it out*—delivered by Mr. Olivier as "*Seek it ou-ou-out!*"—the hero rushes up a staircase to a balcony overlooking the scene, and jumps therefrom in fine Fairbanks style to stab the King. (It is recorded that in filming this scene, the Claudius insisted on having a stand-in for this moment. A professional strong man was fitted into the King's robes. But "even strong men have their limits; this one was knocked unconscious and lost two teeth."¹¹¹)

3. The important line, *Treason! treason!* is omitted.

4. Horatio makes no attempt to die too.

5. There is no Fortinbras. His concluding speech is given to Horatio.

6. At the very end, there is a long procession down steps, then up, up, interminably up; Hamlet's corpse is carried past the Queen's vacant bed (subtle!), then further up, to the top of the battlements. Why? Are we to conclude that Hamlet's body will presently be hurled fathoms below onto the rocks bordering the sea?

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OFF WITH THY MASK! SWEET SINNER OF THE NORTH; THESE MASKS ARE FOILS TO GOOD FACES, AND TO BAD ONES THEY ARE LIKE NEW SATIN OUTSIDES TO LOUSY LININGS.

Dekker and Webster, *Northward Ho!*, V, i

VI *Dramatis Personae: Sounding Through Their Masks*

THUS FAR we have examined the play, emphasizing plot and action, without imposing upon our analysis preconceived interpretations of character. Knowing what we now know, we can at last safely turn to the persons of the drama.

PRINCE HAMLET

We have a rough idea of the hero's tragic flaw. Through a consideration of the plot and action we know what he is not, and more than a little of what he is. If we refuse to wander afield from the play, it shall not be difficult to describe Hamlet as Shakespeare created him.

We already know, for instance, that so far from being a shrinking violet or a creature of meditation who acts only in his imagination, he is an extraordinarily active man, a man who finds it easy to act—as witness: his following the Ghost despite his friends' admonitions, his immediately conceiving the plan for the Mouse-trap on the first possible occasion, his effective presentation of it, his killing of Polonius, his unsealing the King's commission to England and substituting of other orders, his boarding the pirate ship alone, his

winning over the pirates to his bidding, his grappling with Laertes in the grave, his eager acceptance of the challenge to fence, his violent attack on Laertes once he knows he has been tricked, his savage killing of Claudius. We also know that he is thought of not only as a scholar and courtier but as a soldier too, and that it is as a soldier that Fortinbras thinks of him.

Hamlet is thirty years of age. This fact, despite wrangling of scholars over it, is settled by a passage in the play; since it is the only reference to the matter in the entire work, Shakespeare's own words must be considered final and authoritative, and there can be no appeal from them. In the last act the gravedigger informs Hamlet that he took up his profession "on the very day that young Hamlet was born" (V, i, 160); a few lines further on, he adds that he has been working at it "man and boy, thirty years" (177). This poses an even simpler problem in arithmetic than the one we have already so triumphantly solved. (Why so many scholars, no youngsters themselves, are dismayed that Hamlet, who is young, can be thirty, is no less astonishing than shudder-causing to consider. As for Hamlet's being a student at the university, as he and Horatio have been when the play opens, there is nothing strange in that. Until fairly recently universities were not trade schools but institutions of learning. Scholars attended them not to acquire the means of earning a livelihood, nor even to become better citizens, but only to learn. Learning was then an end in itself—a concept now deemed medieval in educational circles (educational authorities do travel in circles)—and the immediate objective was the enrichment of the knowledge of the individual. Even today, of course, one finds many a grey-head among the student population of universities.)

What does Hamlet look like? Certainly he is a man of energetic figure, not at all the wispy creature we so often see upon the boards. It is too ridiculous that when he speaks of his "too too solid flesh" (I, ii, 129) the actor should have barely enough to keep him warm—that when the Queen fears he will lose the match with Laertes because "he's fat, and scant of breath," the Hamlet before us should look like the ghost of a ghost, whom a puff of wind could blow away. Not that we suggest that either of these lines proves the Prince to be corpulent—that would be absurd for a young tragic hero, equally absurd for a man we are to think of as a soldier, an expert

fencer, the glass of fashion and the mold of form. A hero of normally athletic frame venting his disgust with the human race in a fit of revulsion against his mother's remarriage might well deem any flesh too solid; and a fencer out of practice and even a trifle heavier than he has been might be too fat and short of breath for the alertness required in the match. Nothing more is conveyed by the two passages.

Aside from the testimony of Hamlet's activities, we have another clue to his physique—a clue that in itself would not be decisive, but which may be considered proof of the justice of what has been said. Shakespeare, writing for his own troupe, knew in advance which actors would assume the various roles he was creating. He knew, while he was composing *Hamlet*, that Burbage, the great actor who impersonated many of Shakespeare's heroes, would enact the title role. It would be almost unavoidable that the dramatist should, as he evolved the character of Hamlet, have conceived him in the figure of Burbage. And from Burbage's portrait we know him to have been a man of powerful frame. And while in life we would grant, on intimate acquaintance with the person, that a man of powerful physique could actually be timid, or too sensitive, or too thoughtful, or too scrupulous, or complex-ridden, on the stage such qualities can best be communicated by a man delicate—even effeminate-looking—such a Hamlet as unfortunately we usually see. The audience looking at an energetic, muscular figure on the boards will naturally expect him to exhibit energetic, muscular qualities. And these Hamlet possesses.

To reject the idea of a too sensitive, too thoughtful, too scrupulous Hamlet, however, is not to deny him his extraordinary brilliance of intellect. It is a by-product of the specialization which has narrowed every phase of modern life that we take for granted that the hero of the football field avoids the library as he would a leper colony, and that the lover of books will never be found in the stadium. And, indeed, such is by and large our experience. But it was not always so. The Renaissance gentleman held quite as much as the ancients the doctrine of a sound mind in a sound body. His newly recaptured enthusiasm for the riches of human experience, after the long centuries during which only the life after death had been thought worthy of attention, prompted him to encompass as much

of it as he could, and to exercise his faculties to their fullest. The depth and the breadth of Hamlet's character make him, far from the melancholic or the neurotic, almost the most magnificent embodiment in literature of the Renaissance ideal. ~~Where shall~~ be found a more splendid expression of this ideal than his rapturous phrasing of it:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason!
How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express
and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehen-
sion how like a god! The beauty of the world! The para-
gon of animals!

II, ii, 316 seq.,

where a completer tribute to the endless potentialities of man to make *this* life abundant and beautiful? It is the more significant of Hamlet's make-up that he delivers this apostrophe, from the deepest founts of his nature almost in despite of himself, at a moment of great bitterness; and if he adds:

And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man
delights not me,

it is because he has just become convinced that two of his oldest friends have treacherously sold themselves to Claudius' employ.

When we insist that Hamlet is an athletic man of strong body, therefore, we no way imply that his frame is any more powerful than the intellect it houses. Hamlet, indeed, is probably the most admirably intellectual of the world's tragic heroes. His interests are everywhere; he is at home in the world of books, of sports, of music, of speculation, and on the battlefield,* to mention only a few spheres

* This universality is the only respect in which it is safe to say he mirrors his author. Among the endless facets of Shakespeare's genius, the limitlessness of his zest for knowing everything about life is one of the most compelling. It is everywhere stamped upon his very vocabulary. Although few of us seem aware of the fact, we all go about giving autobiographical hints to the world during the communications of the day. A man who perpetually uses the phrase "high-brow" labels himself; no person of culture would think of using it. A man who instinctively praises

of his knowledge. This universality is reflected in his uncommon respect and enthusiasm for words. He uses them with the genius and heady delight of a great poet. Whereas for Polonius words are traps in which he is always getting snared, impediments over which he is forever stumbling, for Hamlet they are important realities. He

some accomplishment with "That was a home run!" and describes a situation of his own with "There was I, sitting in the bleachers," is plainly a man who spends time in, or thinking about, the ball park. A man who speaks of others as "an Ajax in strength," "a Prometheus in endeavor," "a Thersites in gall," portrays himself a bookworm; the man who talks always of "fouling the scent," "clearing the jump," or "putting to ground," when men and women are his subject, is clearly a fox-hunter. Our crop of jitterbugs wore its mad distortions of the language as a banner. Just so we must conclude from Shakespeare's vocabulary that he must have been driven by the most powerful curiosity about every aspect of human experience to observe life more closely than anyone who has ever written.

The English language is more than three times larger in its vocabulary—that is to say, more than three times richer—than any other European tongue. If the cultivated reader, unaware of the statistics, were asked which writer in our language has drawn most copiously from that wealth, which author has the largest vocabulary, his answer would probably be—and it would be a shrewd one—Milton. But he would be incorrect. Milton employs, in truth, a vast vocabulary second only—to Shakespeare's, which is something like twice as great in extensiveness. This fact is truly astonishing, for the inexhaustible erudition and marvelously complex subtlety of Milton's diction would seem to grant the palm to him at first glance; Shakespeare only rarely uses such Milton-like phraseology as:

the multitudinous seas incarnadine;

rather are lines like these far more characteristic of his style:

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

His vocabulary is essentially simple. Its vastness is a product of the matchless variety of human endeavors from which he draws his images. What is most astonishing is the depth of knowledge he demonstrates in every human activity to which he refers. We ourselves are convinced, for example, that he knew music intimately, as a musician would know

holds them up to the light to glory in their form and color. For him they are more than the vestment for ideas, they are also inspiring sources for new ideas. Language, in the wretched circumstances in which he finds himself, is as much comfort to him as music can be to the musician. And that is why, with no one but Horatio to talk to, he pours out the torrent of his soliloquies—in a flood and power such as Shakespeare has allowed no other of his tragic heroes.

It is this brilliance of his intellect which is responsible for much of the confusion of the commentaries. His mind works with lightning rapidity and hurries on from idea to idea. No one about him is anywhere near being his equal, and Horatio is the only one who always understands what he is talking about. Hamlet *always* speaks to the point, *always* talks sense—though expressing it too dazzlingly for his hearers' comprehension. Feeling himself surrounded only by enemies and those in the hire of his enemies, save for one friend and a few honest soldiers, he is too contemptuous of his foes, too indifferent of their opinion, to be plain and homely in his drift, too enamored of words to resist toying with them. It is thoroughly characteristic of him that he is forever using them with double meanings—one for himself, one for his interlocutor; he is not only unconcerned that he speaks beyond the comprehension of the court, he is in this way able to ease his inner torment by venting his scorn of a parcel of time-servers. The others, not following his meanings, find it all the more convenient to explain away their slowness of wit by deeming him mad. But it is surely inexcusable that the scholars, instead of deciphering what he says, should, like Polonius, interpret his flashing brilliance as madness, real or feigned. Hamlet is witty, ironic, sardonic throughout the play—even, at times, because of his speed, cryptic—but he never says anything that for all its brilliance is not perfectly rational and thoroughly logical and appropriate to the moment he says it. One needs the greatest alertness to keep up

it. Over the years students qualified by knowledge and experience to make such studies have written treatises for us which proved they were satisfied that Shakespeare was an expert sailor, an expert lawyer, an expert hunter, an expert gardener, an expert in real estate—and each made out an extremely convincing case. Shakespeare's universality, even more than Hamlet's, is almost incomprehensible, however, to the narrowness of the modern mind.

with him, it is true. But that fact renders him not abnormal, only superior to the normal.*

We have said that he is certainly not a professional philosopher, who discourses for the pleasure of it on abstract concepts—nothing could be more disastrous in drama than such a character given free rein!—but he is a highly philosophical man. That is to say that, like Portia, who in this respect is his counterpart and to a degree shares his basic philosophy, he never starts a train of speculation for its own sake, but rather, like her, is stimulated to speculation by events and experiences. Returning to her home after the trial, Portia observes a light in her house, remarks upon it, and follows it with a philosophical reflection, since that is her turn of mind:

That light we see is burning in my hall.
How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

V, i, 89 seq.

Thus, too, works Hamlet's mind—but with a difference. Because he is a man of powerful energies, a man indeed of violence when aroused, he does not pause to make the observation of the event, but begins with the speculation which the event arouses. You will find embedded in the turmoil of his soliloquies the occasion which causes the violence, but it is always the conclusion which comes first. Thus, in his first soliloquy, he opens with:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

and goes on to express his disgust with the world:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seems to me all the uses of this world,

and only after that comes the event which occasions this revulsion: his mother's callously marrying so soon after his father's death:

That it should come to this!
But two months dead!

I, ii, 129 seq.

* One is aware, of course, that being superior to the norm would render him thoroughly abnormal in the view of some psychologists.

This is the pattern of every one of his soliloquies: first the idea, then the occasion for it. And he soliloquizes in this fashion because his is a volcanic nature, and because in his case the soliloquy is the release for his pent-up feelings. What is important to remember is that, as a philosophic man rather than a philosopher, he is always spurred to powerful reflection by a happening. If we wish to understand him and the play, we must, since this is drama, interpret his soliloquies not literally but in terms of the situations which occasion them.

Since his express conduct is the fundamental part of the tragedy, it is a gross superficiality to follow the lead of the commentators in looking for Hamlet's own philosophy of life in the bitter outpourings of his soliloquies. Their dramatic function is to show us his inner ferment. But a man who loves life very much might be the first to say, "I'm sick of it. I wish I were dead," when suddenly someone very close and dear to him behaves in a way that makes all he thought of that individual an empty illusion. To know how Hamlet feels about life we must watch not what he says about it so much as what he does living it. Look at him in this way, and you will find him not melancholy, not complex-ridden, not pessimistic, not even disillusioned basically—but a healthy, vigorous man, much in love with life, who, given the slightest opportunity, is happy, cheerful, companionable, and kind.

It is not in his many bitter reflections that we are to look for his fundamental view of life, for those are always inspired by the disenchanting conduct of those closest to him, but rather in speeches such as his beautiful apostrophe to the nature of man. If we are to judge him under the circumstances when occasion allows him to react normally, according to the inclinations of his own temperament—that is, when he is dealing with people who give him no cause to distrust them, we shall find him remarkably high-minded and generous. Of all his utterances there is perhaps one that gives us the clearest index to how Hamlet would live, given decent surroundings: when he asks Polonius to see that the actors are "well bestowed" and "well used" (conceiving shrewdly that Polonius may be counted upon to treat them shabbily, as his inferiors), the old man responds:

My lord, I will use them according to their desert,

and Hamlet retorts angrily:

God's bodykins, man, better. Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.

II, ii, 546 seq.

This is akin to the principles by which Portia lives; as she phrases them:

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

IV, i, 198 seq.

But Portia is surrounded by men and women of goodness and kindness, and she is free to allow her philosophy to blossom in all she says and does. Hamlet, encircled by knaves, can be himself only with comparatively few.

He not only takes ~~unconcealed~~ delight in the company of any human being he has no reason to distrust ~~and no pessimist or disillusioned optimist would do this~~ but also puts such people at their ease with ready grace, ~~never stands on ceremony with them, never~~ behaves like the ~~self-conscious~~ prince addressing the commoner, is indeed remarkably democratic in his dealings with them. These traits are exhibited at once on his first encounter with Horatio:

HAM. Horatio!—or I do forget myself.

HOR. The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.

HAM. Sir, my *good friend*. *I'll change that name with you* [i.e., servant].

I, ii, 161 seq.

Then he turns to Marcellus to say:

I am *very* glad to see you.

I, ii, 167

When, at the conclusion of the scene, Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo leave, it is with the formal "Our duty to your honour." But Hamlet, indebted to them for their act of friendship, corrects them:

Your *love*, as mine to you.

I, ii, 254

His is the rare grace of the truly patrician mind which knows how to put others on the footing of equality without condescension. There are many such touches throughout the play. After his interview with the Ghost, when he has sworn Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy, they stand aside for him to precede them out; first he thanks them for their help with great sincerity:

With all my love I do commend me to you.

And what so poor a man as Hamlet is

May do, to express his love and friending to you,

God willing shall not lack.

and then refuses to allow them to attend him as inferiors:

Let us go in together.

I, v, 184 seq.

Again, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first appear, his great pleasure at seeing them is openly expressed:

My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Oh Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both?

II, ii, 228 seq.

His great capacity for enjoyment is manifested at their first mention of the Players; he is full of excited enthusiasm:

He that plays the king shall be welcome . . .

and he plies his schoolfellows with questions about them:

What players are they? . . .

How chances it they travel? . . .

Do they hold the same estimation they did . . . ?

II, ii, 332 seq.

And when the actors arrive his cordiality and joy are unfeigned:

You're welcome, masters, welcome all. I am glad to see thee well. Welcome, good friends. O, my old friend! Thy face is valanced since I saw thee last; com'st thou to beard me in Denmark? What, my young lady and mistress! By'r lady, your ladyship is nearer heaven than when I saw you last . . .

II, ii, 440 seq.

Hamlet has serious shortcomings, yet no hero has more endearing traits. Though, in his first fit of anger against Laertes' extravagant display of grief at Ophelia's grave, he fails to remember that the young man has cause enough to resent him, when calm reflection reminds him of the facts Hamlet has the dignity and courage to admit his fault to Horatio (V, ii, 75 seq.), and soon makes public apology to Laertes before the entire Court:

Give me your pardon, sir. I've done you wrong,
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.

V, ii, 237-38

Our respect for his integrity is the greater because he makes this beautiful amends to a man who is prepared to kill him by treachery.

His capacity for affection is profound and untainted by the bitterness of his circumstances. His open cordiality to Marcellus, Bernardo, and the actors proves how quickly he warms to those who deal honorably with him. It is the conduct of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia which drives him to suspect them. ~~With her he is most loath to be suspicious, indeed, and for all her stupidity and his harsh words his love for her never alters. It is no bar to the love he bears her and his desire to marry her that she is a commoner.~~ The commonplace Polonius and Laertes, who in Hamlet's place would never be so indifferent to disparity of rank, can only think that Hamlet's purposes must be dishonorable. ~~But social differences are of no consequence to the Prince, when he loves.~~

His friendship with Horatio, his one solace, is one of the great beauties of the play—not to be missed because it is understated. As is common with men, the two need few words to express it, and Hamlet only once feels the urge to put it into words (III, ii, 59 seq.), and then most eloquently. A look, a phrase, suffices for communicat-

ing the complete understanding between them; nor does Horatio hesitate gently to inform his friend when he believes him in the wrong. Though quiet, it is one of the great friendships of literature, and is itself a demonstration of Hamlet's capacities for the richest of lives.*

If Hamlet, therefore, pours out bitter words it is not because his nature is warped. On the contrary, his bitterness is only the expression of the frustration of his powers for delight, good health, activity, and affection—of his having to check, because of the situation he is in and the corruptibility of those he has loved best, his deepest impulses to love and to lead a full, wholesome life. It is the bitterness of the dynamic personality straining at the bonds imposed upon it, of the affectionate nature that must withhold its warmth, and instead of loving must distrust.

In terms of his situation how are we then to describe his tragic flaw, the *hamartia* which will hurl him to destruction? We have already identified it as a species of rashness,† and thus placed him in

* It is a matter for serious consideration whether the institution of friendship, the noblest of human relationships, is not now on its way out, its demise under Freudian auspices. As *The New Yorker* put it some years ago, things are getting so bad that two men no longer dare to go away together for a weekend without taking along a woman. In these naughty times, it already takes considerable courage to maintain the relationship. For some curious reason, anyone may hate any member of the same sex without incurring the suspicion of abnormality; it is pathological only to feel affection. Hamlet and Horatio must inevitably fall under the axe, when psychoanalysis gets around to them!

† To estimate how distant we are from the commentaries, let us quickly review critical opinion on Hamlet's tragic flaw. Stoll says he has none; he "has no tragic fault . . . —like Romeo's his fault is not in himself but in his stars."¹ Walley agrees: "He is a good man overthrown by evil through no particular fault of his own."² Spurgeon implies the same: the problem of the tragedy "is not the problem of an individual at all";³ Fergusson adopts this view.⁴ (None of these explains how, lacking a hero with a tragic flaw, *Hamlet* qualifies as tragedy.) We have noted that Hamlet's tragic failing according to Goethe is extreme sensitivity; according to Coleridge and Schlegel, excessive intellectualization; Bradley, melancholia; Ulrici, moral scrupulosity; the psychoanalysts, a complex. (Klein and Werder found the root of the tragedy outside the hero's

the company of the classic tragic heroes of world literature—Clytemnestra, Oedipus, Electra, Creon, Phèdre, Mrs. Alving, Lady Dedlock, Brutus, Othello, Macbeth, Lear, Cleopatra, Jude the Obscure, Eustacia, Emma Bovary, and the Lost Lady—all great souls who fall through heedlessness, each in his own way.

By temperament nothing is easier for Hamlet than to act; his powerful nature propels him into action on the slightest challenge. But his problem is such as is hardest for a man so constituted: to wait, to be patient until he can prove that the Ghost spoke the truth, and, having settled that, to build his case against Claudius so that vengeance will be plainly an act of justice before the world. His own strong-mindedness makes him fully aware of the course he must choose, and he exhibits a degree of self-control remarkable for a man of his volcanic impulses. So far from being the hero who cannot whip himself into action, he is the tragic figure that *can* act readily, but *who must not*—until the moment be ripe. It is heart-breaking to witness the extent to which his mind *does* triumph over his energetic nature, the extent to which he *does* hold the impulse to act in leash; his self-control is truly heroic. But great as it is, it is not enough. Precisely when he is beginning to reap the harvest of his hard-won patience, he forfeits everything by his unconsidered killing of the man behind the arras, Polonius—as it turns out. This act of sheer impulse has negated the value of all he has suffered and accomplished, and, moreover, has tendered his fate into the hands of his enemy.

Hamlet is well aware of his tragic rashness of temperament. His admiration for Horatio is based upon his friend's better balanced nature:

character, in his enviring circumstances.) One critic finds Hamlet lacking all passion for action;⁵ another, lacking all emotion.⁶ Another accuses him of desiring to be too perfect;⁷ a lady thinks the cause of his disaster his determination never to marry.⁸ Masefield finds him too wise to act, since in Hamlet's world action would be fruitless.⁹ Adams thinks "the young Prince possesses to a fatal extent *idealism regarding human nature*": his tragic fault is a "too easy faith in human nature."¹⁰ And Campbell believes that because Hamlet is inconsolable for his losses, "his grief is of the sort that renders him dull, that effaces memory, that makes him guilty of the sin of sloth."¹¹

for thou hast been
 As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
 A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
 Hath ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
 In my heart's core . . .

III, ii, 70 seq.

How different from himself, whose blood is ever at war with his judgment! Nor does Hamlet need any other to apprise him of the fatality of his rash murder of the old man; he sees it at once—when the deed is irremediable. And, as he is being hurried off to England, he puts the blame where it is due—his failure to use his head when it was most important to do so:

Sure, He that made us with such large discourse [i.e.,
power of reasoning],
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and god-like reason
 To fust in us unused.

IV, iv, 36 seq.

Yes, it was his duty to look before and after, and in truth he did so astonishingly well for such a man. But in his situation, any loss of reason, any impulsive act invites destruction.

Well, fate is kinder than he has title to expect. An impulse causes him to go through the papers of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, and there he discovers the palpable proof of Claudius' criminality that he requires. In his account of the adventure to Horatio, completely forgetting that it was rashness which once ruined his cause and might easily have brought about his own death, he hymns rashness because this time it resulted in a benefit:

Rashly,—
 And praised be rashness for it; let us know
 Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
 When our deep plots do pall . . .

V, ii, 6 seq.

His experience should have taught him otherwise. Once again the stars are auspicious; he has a second, even a better chance to carry out his task, despite his tragic error. But as he speaks we tremble for the issue: what can be hoped for a man who is glad to be rash? He is, as usual, too ready

to take arms against a sea of troubles.

And our fears are only too just. He accepts the offer to fence with Laertes. Rashly forgetting that Laertes has no reason to wish him well, and that the King, now his bitter enemy, who has already practised against his life, is the sponsor of the match, Hamlet omits inspecting the foils.

As we have said, no lover of the sport would inspect them. What tennis player examines the ball before it comes his way, to see that it is stuffed with hair, not with dynamite? Ah, but what tennis player accepts an invitation to the match from his deadliest foe? Or, if he did, would it not be wise of him to inspect the balls, unsportsmanlike though it be? Hamlet, in his excitement over the in-incriminating document in his possession, is heedless again, and forgets the resourcefulness of his adversary—this time, fatally. And so, though he presently executes his task, he does so at the needless cost of his life.

This rashness of his is, of course, allied to his best qualities—his strength, his courage, as made demonstrable on the many occasions when he leaps into action. It is allied, too, to his indifference to the esteem of the court, his willingness to let them think what they please of his sanity. It is a by-product, as are his wit, irony, and toying with words, of his excessive good health, his strong animal spirits.

But, as in life our defects are usually the other side of our best qualities, it is also allied to his worst faults. Because of it, Hamlet, so gracious and just, can be unpardonably unjust. Once he has decided that Guildenstern and Rosencrantz have been sent for by Claudius, he never pauses to ask whether they may not be acting out of true friendship to him, whether their motives may do them no discredit. It is enough for him that his intuitions tell him that they are guilty, and he sends them to a death they certainly have not merited—as Horatio sees may be the case—and he does so without any regrets. The same quickness of temper which makes his

discourse scintillate, prompts him to rapid decisions that can be grossly unfair. Thus, too, we listen in amazement as, at Ophelia's grave, he exclaims indignantly to Laertes:

Hear you, sir,
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I loved you ever.

V, i, 311 seq.

Because he is aware of having always thought only well of Laertes, he can forget that he has killed the young man's father, and that in reason Laertes might hate him as much as he himself hates Claudius.

It is a character with grave faults.* But its beauties are so extensive that there is copious room even for such shortcomings. It is a character of great scope, and such defects as are in it are commensurate with the virtues.

Before leaving the Prince, we think it interesting to note that there are three young men in the play in a similar circumstance—and perhaps so placed by the dramatist that we might gauge Hamlet's character the more accurately—Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. Each has had a father killed and each assumes the filial duty of avenging that death. In circumstances Hamlet is closer to Laertes: their fathers have been murdered secretly, or in a manner that is kept from the world. Fortinbras' father was killed in open combat by the late king of Denmark; the world knows the manner of his death, and Fortinbras is free to seek revenge when he collects an army to march against Denmark (I, i, 80 seq.). In character, however, Hamlet is closer to Fortinbras, and would act with his directness and honor. But he is not free, like him, to engage upon his task. Not having the low traits of Laertes, Hamlet is unwilling to go about achieving vengeance in the former's contemptible manner. Polonius' son is so much concerned about what the world will think

* Some, among whom we do not wish to be numbered, would consider Hamlet's occasional adventures into ribaldry as a failing too. Mercurio is even looser of tongue than he, and no one has ever held it against him. The license with which he and Hamlet sometimes speak is harmless, more a symptom in a young man of excessive vitality than an index of licentious character.

of him if he does not at once kill someone—almost anyone—in return for his father's death, that he has not a thought for justice or honor. Unlike Hamlet, he can cry:

Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.

IV, v, 132 seq.

Though not a saint, Hamlet, when he is conscious of what he is doing, will not give the next world to negligence, nor will he damn his immortal soul; he desires justice as well as vengeance. Laertes is first ready to kill Claudius; having no greater motive than personal satisfaction, he is easily quieted by the resourceful King, and won over to a plot against Hamlet. No method is too nefarious for him; he would be willing "to cut his throat" even "in the church"; and he is quick to second Claudius' plan of an unbated sword with the suggestion of envenoming its point. These are short cuts to achieving an eye for an eye, but they are not such as Hamlet's noble nature would ever permit him to employ. If he were as luckily placed as Fortinbras, he would behave as does the Norwegian Prince; being situated as Laertes is, it is impossible for him to deal treacherously like him. Thus Hamlet stands between the two, a nobler Fortinbras situated as Laertes is situated, and unwilling to behave as Laertes would behave.

KING CLAUDIUS

For the dramatic contest, a hero of such dimension calls for an opponent worthy of him, and in Claudius Shakespeare has equipped Hamlet with a by-no-means contemptible adversary.

It is true, as Professor Adams observes, that Hamlet describes him as a "satyr," a "bat," a "filthy moor," a clown, and a toad, but we are not to fall into the trap with this commentator by calling this "abundant evidence that he is unattractive, even repulsive."¹² So, too, Professor Bradley, on Hamlet's authority, says of Claudius that "he had a small nature. . . . He was a man of mean appearance—a

mildewed ear, a toad, a bat; and he was also bloated by excess in drinking. People made mouths at him in contempt while his brother lived.”¹³ Such is indeed Hamlet’s portrait of him, but we should be as unwise to take the Prince’s word for the picture, as to believe Claudius when he describes Hamlet to Laertes as malicious. Hamlet, unconcerned with being fair to his two old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, will certainly be less so to the man he loathes. Mr. Masfield adds a touch unprovided by Hamlet when he says the King “fears intellect,”¹⁴ thus making him akin, for no reason, to Julius Caesar. This ugly, drunken butcher has become all too familiar on the stage, and there are good grounds for being sure that Shakespeare had no such person in mind when he created Claudius.

Gertrude, the last woman to run to adultery, was driven to it obviously by powerful physical attraction to her late husband’s brother. To explain to the audience how such a conventional-minded woman could be compelled to indulge so inhibited a relationship, Claudius must be handsome, or at least attractive enough to make evident his sexual magnetism. A few critics have been fairer to him. Professor Jones wisely rejects Hamlet’s prejudiced testimony, but he overstates the case by saying: “When Hamlet goes ‘mad,’ Claudius does everything that a reasonable and kindly man could be expected” to do.¹⁵ Kindly towards Hamlet, Claudius certainly never feels. Professor Kittredge, much closer to Shakespeare’s intention than most, on the other hand, goes much too far: “King Claudius is a superb figure. . . . His intellectual powers are of the highest order. He is eloquent . . . always and everywhere a model of royal dignity. . . . Intellectually, then, we must admit Claudius to as high a rank as Hamlet himself.”¹⁶ The truth is that there are few men in world drama whom we can admit intellectually to as high a rank as Hamlet.

But Claudius is a highly intelligent man, capable, attractive, and well-fitted to rule a kingdom. Professor Bradley, allowing a disparity between the King’s physical and mental attributes, grudgingly admits: “He is not without respectable qualities. As a king he is courteous and never undignified; he performs his ceremonial duties efficiently; and he takes good care of the national interests.”¹⁷ We can put the case more strongly. Denmark is well-satisfied to have him on the throne. When Guildenstern says to him:

We both obey,
And here give up ourselves, in the full bent
To lay our services freely at your feet,
To be commanded.

II, ii, 29 seq.

he is no more vilely selling his soul to the devil than are Voltimand and Cornelius, sent on a well-managed embassy to Norway, when they say:

In that and all things will we show our duty.

I, ii, 40

Such, with public reason enough, are the sentiments of the entire court. We have no cause to believe that as a monarch he is inferior to the late king. Hamlet's father was a brave warrior and a scholar; but Claudius by skillful diplomacy keeps his country out of war. He speaks with elegance, courtesy, and intelligence, and it is easy to see why he is well liked. Such a man, of course, makes Hamlet's situation the more desperate. A bloated clown would render his case easier.

Claudius, for all his ability, if not debased and ignoble, is not, however, a noble character. The root of his criminality seems to be a completely materialistic nature, rarely touched by spiritual values; his is the temperament most at home in politics. He has thirsted for the power and riches of this life, and has been undeterred by principle in achieving them in the directest way possible. Having dispatched his brother and married the Queen, he is quite anxious to live on good terms with Hamlet—not out of any kindness towards him—but because if the Prince is willing to be affable, life will become completely agreeable for the King. He neither fears nor loves Hamlet, indeed must be well aware (intelligent as he is) of Hamlet's intense dislike of him; but a happy, well-contented stepson is all he needs to lay the disturbing memory of his brother's murder. It is for this reason that he perseveres in trying to win the Prince's good will and makes it clear that Hamlet is heir to the throne. Not that he particularly desires Hamlet's affection. But if Hamlet lives apparently at peace with his family, the world will the sooner forget the rapidity of Gertrude's remarriage and its incestuous nature.

Murderer though he is, he is not the worst of men. There is a kind of man who seems beyond all hope of salvation, the self-deceiving criminal, the hypocrite who is swift to lay the responsibility for his own evil at the door of others—such a blood-chilling creature as Shakespeare created in Angelo (in *Measure for Measure*). Claudius conceals very well from the world his criminality, but he plays no tricks with himself. When he is on his knees trying to pray to God for forgiveness, he knows full well that the miscreant cannot be forgiven while he clutches firm the prize for which he sinned. His terrible honesty at this moment wrenches our hearts with a twinge of compassion for him, and he somewhat merits it. He, at least, is the superior of those who fancy they can cheat Heaven by mouthing empty words of prayer, when in his misery he exclaims:

But O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be; since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain the offence?

III, iii, 51 seq.

If he is not noble, there is a part of his life which partakes of nobility, and that is his love for his wife. It is very plain that he wished to marry Gertrude not for the crown alone but because of his love for her. He says as much to God, when he is baring his soul and its motives. It is the simple truth which, with the embarrassment of one man confessing his love of his wife to another, he delivers to Laertes, when the younger man asks him why, if Hamlet, as Claudius has said, "pursued" the King's life, Claudius took no measures against his stepson:

The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks; and for myself—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

IV, vii, 11 seq.

The testimony to the truth of this red-faced confession is everywhere in the play. You will notice that not once during the entire course of the drama does Claudius ever say a disparaging thing concerning Hamlet to the Queen. Moreover, Hamlet in their presence is untiring in his insults to the King; Claudius may bite his lip, but his answer to the Prince is always polite. He even pretends to construe the offending remark as a cordiality. A clever man, his motives, as with all of us, are mixed; his forbearance with Hamlet—publicly—can only redound to his credit and Hamlet's obloquy. But there is no doubt that his forced patience is also born of his desire to spare his Queen any hurt.

The priggish may point out that the tie between Claudius and Gertrude is a purely physical one. But aside from the question as to whether or not a purely physical tie exists anywhere except on the theoretic plane, even if such a love is not of the highest kind, it is love which is between them, and, Shakespeare plainly feels, such a love is better than no love at all. It certainly deserves being measured by its fruits, and Claudius' considerateness of Gertrude is the one truly elevated aspect of his character. He has spared her all participation in, all knowledge of her first husband's murder, and he continues sparing her by suppressing his growing hatred of Hamlet so that she need not be torn between her love for both of them. He definitely limits his own freedom of action against the Prince through his protectiveness of his wife, and for her sake bears the brunt of Hamlet's public derision—a difficult task for a man of his strong character.

Claudius, of course, unlike the others, at no time thinks Hamlet mad, though it is practicable for him to go along with the rumor. With the unquiet mind of the murderer, he interprets Hamlet's hostile conduct as indicating that the Prince may by some unimaginable means know more than he should. Claudius would give anything to be resolved on this point. Once the Mouse-trap reveals how much Hamlet does know, Claudius is quick to plan removing his enemy. And then his foe's own blunder gives him his perfect opportunity of ending the threat to his own security, and he at once seizes it.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Shakespeare's portrait of the Queen is one of the most brilliant depictions in literature of the sentimentalist. Gertrude is a well-meaning, superficial woman of quick but shallow emotions. Her chief desire is to be happy and see everyone around her contented; like all sentimentalists she is touched by the distress of others but is quite unequal to the smallest of personal sacrifices that might be of help to them. Thus, she is so far superior to Polonius and Laertes, that she anticipates with pleasure Hamlet's marrying a "good girl" like Ophelia, even though she be a commoner; she is gentle and kind with the girl—until she is in trouble. At the news that Ophelia has become demented, Gertrude's first reaction is:

I will not speak with her.

And when she is told the girl's "mood will needs be pitied," answers in self-protection:

What would she have?

IV, v, 1 seq.

Gertrude does not wish to be unnerved by the sight of Ophelia's distress. Once Ophelia is safely dead, however, she can afford the luxury of tender rhetoric:

Sweets to the sweet; farewell!

(Scattering flowers)

I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.

I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,

And not to have strewed thy grave.

Her love for her son is genuine enough, as far as it goes. She cannot understand why, with everyone else resigned to his father's death, he protracts his mourning—all of two months! She reminds him that "all that lives must die," that death is "common." When Hamlet bitterly throws the phrase back at her:

Ay, madam, it is common,

she completely misses his savage irony, and asks, in her obvious-minded way:

If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?
I, ii, 72 seq.

If only Hamlet would be sensible, is her feeling—if only he would be pleasant to his new father and forget the old, how charming life could be!

She is a soft creature, and affectionate—when the cost is not too high—and would like to see Hamlet marry for her own sake as well as his. She is delighted that her husband has sent for Guildenstern and Rosencrantz on the pretense that they may cheer their old friend and “draw him on to pleasures.” Her son’s invitation to attend his play she welcomes as a symptom that he is recovering from sullenness, and she eagerly takes up the role of the indulgent mother.

One can imagine that she must have had her bad moments during her late husband’s life whenever she had occasion to reflect on her infidelity to him; she is not the kind of woman who could be very happy in sin. But things always turn out for the best! Her husband luckily relieved her of a moral problem by dying, and she was able to marry her lover. It must have been with a sigh of thankfulness that she took on again the mantle of respectability. One can be sure that by the time the drama begins, she has quite forgotten her adultery, though it ended but two months earlier. This would explain her amazing conduct while the Mouse-trap is being presented. She watches it, personally unaffected, as she would watch any other mildly diverting entertainment, and Hamlet learns nothing about her guilt from her reactions. Knowing nothing of a murder, she naturally draws no analogy between the slayer of the little play and Claudius. But we should expect a woman of any depth to be startled by the close similarity to her own experience of that of the fickle Player Queen’s. Gertrude fails to see herself reflected. How should this tale of adultery apply to her? The Player Queen is disloyal in her love, and she herself is a respectable married woman! She is so unmoved by the proceedings that Hamlet, foiled in his plan so far as she is concerned, is forced to ask during the performance:

Madam, how like you this play?

And with the calm of an impartial observer she answers:

The lady protests too much, methinks.

III, ii, 239-40

She has the impenetrable hide of your true sentimentalist.

When the Mouse-trap has upset Claudius in some way she does not fathom, she intends giving her son a sorrowful lecture on his filial ungraciousness. Hamlet's violence, however, frightens her out of the dramatics she has planned. Then after the shock of Polonius' death, horrifying to her gentle nature, she is forced by Hamlet for a few brief moments to listen to his torrent of accusation, and the worst of all her experiences commences: she is face to face with the unbeautiful truth about herself. Nothing is less endurable than his relentlessly holding up the glass for her soul; and in terror she cries out:

O, speak to me no more!

These words like daggers enter in mine ears.

No more, sweet Hamlet!

III, iv, 94-96

Suddenly the Ghost appears, and Hamlet holds discourse with what is apparently the vacant air, pointing out the figure that is invisible to her. Her terror ceases, and she murmurs:

Alas, he's mad!

III, iv, 105

—and one can almost hear her adding silently, "Thank God!" He's mad, and everything that he has said is a product of his madness. Nothing he has charged her with was really true—the likeness of that depraved woman he has so powerfully delineated is no portrait of her. Those dreadful words of his were only the ravings of a lunatic. She can forget them now. Rather she can luxuriate in a mother's concern for her poor son and his ruined mind!

It is almost unbearably pathetic to see, as Hamlet proceeds in his efforts to wake her conscience, torturing himself the while, how deluded he is in thinking he is making the slightest impression on her. He does not suspect that she has already forgotten his bitter charges, is already deaf to his renewal of them.

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain,

III, iv, 156

she weeps, and he imagines that her heart is broken to see how vile she has been. What she means, however, is that her mother-heart is cracked to witness how far gone is her poor son's mental sickness. As she wrings her hands over his plight, she has inwardly returned to her hitherto-undisturbed self-complacency.*

THE FAIR OPHELIA

Shakespeare's portrait of Ophelia is perhaps the most interesting depiction in world drama of a thoroughly uninteresting young woman. She has been compared with various of his other heroines, but actually he has drawn no one like her, except possibly Hero (of *Much Ado*), and even she has a few flashes of spirit. These two, alone among his women, resemble the type English heroine. The others are truly astounding in the modernity of their conception. One looks in vain for such flesh-and-blood creations as his in the whole range of the English novel (with the exception of the girls of Jane Austen and a very few of Dickens) up to the time of Meredith. How wishy-washy seem the traditional modest maidens to be found in the pages of Richardson, Fielding, Scott, and Dickens—a procession of heroines almost interchangeable—when measured with Juliet, Portia, Beatrice, Rosalind, Viola, Olivia, Isabella, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Helena, Cleopatra, Imogen, Hermione, Perdita, and Miranda, how vapid and colorless! No wonder that in exasperation with those English Patient Griseldas Thackeray created his little rogue of a Becky—and then fell victim to the tradition when he conceived his Amelia! Shakespeare's girls are real women, full of charm and warmth and intelligence, most of them witty and

* Though commentaries have been scant on Gertrude, she has had her share of critical distortions—all the way from the scholar who maintains she is a queenly woman who never committed adultery,¹⁸ to the feminine admirer who is convinced that in the last scene she deliberately commits suicide, drinking of a cup she suspects to be poisoned in order to warn her son against drinking too.¹⁹ This absurd notion was incorporated into Mr. Olivier's movie version, with what permanent damage to the play we can tell only when we know whether future productions will make it traditional, as they may. Gertrude, of course, had no way of knowing that the drink was envenomed.

gay too. Ophelia is the exception. She is the quiet, modest, submissive, spiritless fair creature dear to the heart of English fiction. Unhappily such girls do exist (though, luckily, in diminishing numbers—one of the few improvements of modern times); many parents have assiduously educated their girl-children to be that sort of “good” girl. And since they do exist, Shakespeare may very well have felt that he needed Ophelia to make his gallery of women complete. She is, moreover, the perfect foil for his hero, the perfect heroine for his story. Anyone less insipid would have dimmed the brightness of his hero and tempered the bitterness of the circumstances in which Hamlet is involved.

If you wish to convert a healthy child into Ophelia’s kind of pliant creature without will, the approved method is to suppress every one of her normal impulses as soon as she manifests it, every symptom that she may be thinking independently of your direction. To make her good, as you define goodness, you render her incapable of expressing an emotion (beyond weeping, of course, which you will commend as proper to modesty), incapable of an original thought or motion. Your child, thus trained, will be thoroughly marketable in the marriage mart; you also ensure an uneventful life for her and a maddeningly dull one for her spouse.

In this technique of rearing such a maiden, Polonius has been past master—like all fathers who prefer libertines for sons and nuns for daughters. He has her completely bullied. She is accustomed to delivering up to him her most private thoughts. She allows him to intercept her mail without demurring—fancy what would occur if anyone dared tamper with letters addressed to Portia, Beatrice, or Isabella! But Ophelia cannot imagine rebelling or even objecting. She listens to his endless sermons—and when he becomes short-winded, her brother takes up where he left off. She listens to both with docility, and thinks them very knowing in the ways of the world. The one concern they have is that she keep her maidenhead intact until she is safely married; that is their (and how many others’!) conception of keeping a maid virtuous. They succeed. She always does as she is told, and follows her father’s commands to the letter—at the price of her happiness. She has come to be utterly dependent on his management of her life. Without it she is lost. She never says a truer word than, when her father asks if she can be such a fool as

to think Hamlet sincere in his honorable professions, her honest admission:

I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

I, iii, 104

That is her customary frame of mind. She has been taught to place no stock in her intuitions, to form no judgment of her own. Her heart tells her that Hamlet's love is true and honorable; but if her brother and father both assure her that it cannot be, she finds it safer to credit them.

It has been asked how so brilliant and vital a man as Hamlet could possibly love a girl as vapid as Ophelia. Ah! If one could answer that, one could also answer why in life A marries B, why X loves Y. Such disparities between men and women in love are only too common. Probably the last mystery science will ever solve is the cause of love.

About Ophelia commentary has been almost as lunatic as about her lover. Of course, most men have not really approved of such high-spirited and intellectual girls as Shakespeare usually created; Beatrice, for instance, has come in for a great deal of disparagement because of her blazing wit; and some critics have been appalled at the possibility of any man's marrying so irrepressible a woman. Ophelia, therefore, has had her particular devotees; it is to be feared that there are still too many insecure men who idealize her sort of nincompoop. Samuel Johnson speaks of her as "the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious,"²⁰ censuring Hamlet for his treatment of her. In the nineteenth century she is described as "like an artless, gladsome, and spotless shepherdess. . . . The world . . . is not worthy of her."²¹ The Germans, who prefer her type as excellent material for a worthy *hausfrau*, have adored her. One of them says that in her he sees "a gentle violet, a truthful, modest German girl, a completely Nordic woman's temperament—poor in words, shut up within herself, not knowing how to express with her lips her deep rich heart. She is akin to Cordelia and Desdemona. . . . She is thoroughly German, old German, in her family relationships."²² There is little quarrel, then, as to the passivity of her character; the only difference would seem to be whether or not one can admire it. Few of her admirers, however, go so far as to count her losing her

mind as another grace: "There is something very poetical in Ophelia's sharing her Hamlet's destiny,—even in the very form,—a mind diseased,—in which it has come upon him. Her pure and selfless love reflects even this state of her beloved; no cup is so bitter but that if it is poured out for him she will drink it with him. Nay, she, the gentle, unresisting woman, drains to the dregs that which his masculine hand can push aside (at least for a time) when he has but tasted it. United as their hearts were by love, this madness of Ophelia brings her closer * to Hamlet than any prosperity could have done." ²³ Greater love than this hath no woman for her lover: that she become insane to keep him company!

It is rather around the matter of "Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia" that the discussion has raged. Nothing in the history of the criticism of this play astonishes more than that this should be a mysterious issue, for nothing is made plainer in the tragedy itself. Nevertheless, Professor Wilson perfectly reflects critical opinion when he says, "The attitude of Hamlet towards Ophelia is without doubt the greatest of all the puzzles in the play, greater even than that of the delay itself." ²⁴ It is the part of the drama that most disturbed Professor Bradley, too, who found it impossible "to account for the disgusting and insulting grossness of his language to her," ²⁵ and who says again, "I am unable to arrive at a conviction as to the meaning of some of his words and deeds, and I question whether from the mere text of the play a sure interpretation of them can be drawn"; ²⁶ the conclusion forced upon this eminent scholar is that Hamlet's love for Ophelia "was not an absorbing passion." ²⁷

The most common view, however, is that Hamlet has loved Ophelia sincerely, but that his mother's swift marriage after his father's death has poisoned his feelings towards the entire sex, and it is for this reason that Ophelia becomes, as Goethe describes her, "Forsaken, cast off, and despised." ²⁸ Hartley Coleridge puts the case thus: "Hamlet loved Ophelia in his happy youth, when all his thoughts were fair and sweet as she. But his father's death, his

* Ophelia's madness must certainly have given demonic strength to their love if it could bring them closer—when we remember that during the period which witnessed her loss of mind and her death, he was away at sea.

mother's frailty, have wrought sad alteration in his soul, and made the very form of woman fearful and suspected. His best affections are blighted, and Ophelia's love, that young and tender flower, escapes not the general infection."²⁹ Such a view cooperates (as does that of the psychoanalysts, that "he rejects Ophelia" because of his Oedipus complex), of course, with a conception of Hamlet which we have already thrown into the discard: a Hamlet morbid, melancholy, and neurotic. It is based usually on his outburst, during his first soliloquy:

Frailty, thy name is woman!

I, ii, 146

But it will be noted that he does not say that Frailty's name is Ophelia; that is to say, it is of his mother he is thinking and speaking when he delivers that line. And there is no reason why a young man of wholesome mind who is properly disgusted with his mother's licentious conduct should transfer that disgust to his sweetheart without occasion.

Another widely accepted view is that Hamlet rejects Ophelia because he must give all his energies, all his thoughts, all his attention to the task of vengeance. A mid-nineteenth-century critic phrases it: "There could be no sterner resolve than to abandon every purpose of existence, that he might devote himself, unfettered, to his revenge; nor was ever resolution better observed. He breaks through his passion for Ophelia, and keeps it down, under the most trying circumstances, with such inflexible firmness, that an eloquent critic has seriously questioned whether his attachment was real."³⁰ Gervinus elaborates the conception by interpreting the "Get thee to a nunnery" scene as "the farewell of an unhappy heart to a connection broken by fate; it is the serious advice of a self-interested lover, who sends his beloved to a convent because he grudges her to another, and sees the path of his own future lie in hopeless darkness."³¹ Sometimes Hamlet's "rejection of Ophelia" is put on a less self-conscious base; as Schlegel expresses it, "he is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others."³²

However convincing such rejection may sound in the abstract, however conceivable on the part of an emotionally unbalanced man, it is perfect nonsense, in terms of human experience, to think it

possible to a healthy young man. No normally constituted lover renounces love because he has a great problem to deal with. It is precisely in such crises that the male is most in need of a woman's affection; the greater the problem the greater will be his urge to rely upon the consolation of such affection. It is simply not human to think of Hamlet as giving up Ophelia because he must concentrate on avenging his father—and, moreover, nothing of the kind is said or demonstrated in the play.

Several critics have thought that Hamlet has seduced Ophelia,³³ and Tieck gives a peculiarly unpleasant version of that: "The poet has meant to intimate throughout the piece that the poor girl, in the ardor of her passion for the fair prince, has yielded all to him. The hints and warnings of Laertes come too late. . . . At the acting of the play before the court, Ophelia has to endure all sorts of coarseness from Hamlet before all the courtiers; he treats her without that respect which she appears to him to have long forfeited."³⁴ It is to be hoped that this piece of nineteenth-century morality will make the reader shudder, and think his own era not so bad after all.

Other odd explanations of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship have been advanced. Quiller-Couch observes that in the old Hamlet story the prototype of Ophelia was a prostitute: Shakespeare altered her character to make her innocent, but made her act as though she were a loose woman.³⁵ (An extraordinary feat in drama!) Adams imagines that Hamlet thinks "Claudius has foul designs upon the innocence of Ophelia."³⁶ Almost the extremest of these positions is Wilson's: Hamlet "treats Ophelia like a prostitute"³⁷ because she agreed to trap him for Polonius and the King; this Wilson thinks the only solution to "the greatest of all puzzles in the play."

It has remained, however, for a Spanish critic to push this hectic view of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship to the limits of incredibility. Madariaga, whose Hamlet is a monster of monomania, exclaims: "The idea that Hamlet could be in love with anybody but himself is incompatible with Hamlet's character"³⁸ . . . Hamlet was at no time in love with Ophelia,"³⁹ nor was she ever in love with Hamlet, the proof of her emotions being her "acquiescence in her father's designs."⁴⁰ Merely through the call of the flesh, Hamlet and Ophelia have "strayed into intimacy without much depth of love."⁴¹ They are two sophisticates who have loaned each other the use of their

bodies for mutual pleasure, and Ophelia has "been free enough with her favors" to the Prince, who by this time is largely bored with her.⁴² (Had the play been a Restoration comedy, this interpretation might make some sense—provided, of course, that even in that period the dramatist had been someone other than Shakespeare.)

The only correct answer to the question as to why Hamlet rejects Ophelia is the same as the answer to the question as to why he procrastinates: *he doesn't*. We confess that to us "the greatest of all puzzles" about the play is how this particular question ever became a puzzle. Certainly Shakespeare could not have been clearer.

What happens is not that Hamlet rejects Ophelia—such a move would never occur to him—but that, as any young man would interpret her conduct, Ophelia rejects Hamlet. *Shakespeare devoted an entire scene* (I, iii), and several additional passages, in exposition of the fact. Nothing else develops in that scene but the departure of Laertes—a matter of no dramatic importance, which could have been managed by report or even taken for granted when Polonius later sends Reynaldo to spy on him. But Shakespeare uses the scene of Laertes' departure to further our comprehension of the rift to come between Hamlet and Ophelia. About to leave for foreign parts, Laertes lectures his timid sister, warning her that she must suspect Hamlet of evil designs upon her maidenhead. The pusillanimous Ophelia assures him quite sincerely:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart. (45-6)

And she means it. There are never subtle shadings in the discourse of Ophelia: her simple speech is the expression of a simple mind. Though Laertes is no way gifted to understand either the heart or the head of a man like Hamlet, his sister is so habituated to being directed by her father and brother that she is at least willing to weigh his counsel. Now Polonius comes in to repeat the lecture. When Laertes has left, the old man turns upon her, and we are witness to the bullying process by which he has stamped all vitality out of her:

I must tell you
You do not understand yourself so clearly

As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
What is between you? Give me up the truth. (95-8)

He laboriously seconds Laertes' certainty about Hamlet's wicked intentions, and pooh-poohs Hamlet's vows of love as well-tested traps to ensnare a green girl—as he knows from his own experience:

I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows. (115-17)

She, as ever, does not know what to think, and so Polonius makes up her mind for her. She is to have nothing more to do with Hamlet.

Being what she is, the spiritless girl faithfully obeys him. Two months later he is able to report to his monarchs that she has locked herself from Hamlet's "resort," admitted "no messengers," received "no tokens," and handed over to her father his letters, one of which he proceeds to read aloud, with critical asides, to Claudius and Gertrude (II, ii, 107 seq.).

No explanation given him, no communication answered, what is Hamlet to think of Ophelia but that she has found it suddenly expedient to break with him, at a time when he has no friends at court? He feels that she has renounced him when most he needs her love, that she is a time-server like her father, that she finds it advantageous to avoid him while he is surrounded by enemies. It is to be sure of this judgment that he forces his way into her room, as he must do if he is to see her at all. There, frightened by his abrupt entry, so unlike his normal courtly behavior, she is too much pulverized by her father's threats to explain to Hamlet why he has not seen her, why she has not been able to write to him. Because of Polonius' orders, she stands before him petrified into silence, and confused. Her confusion, naturally, certifies Hamlet's worst fears.

Then as ever, under her father's thumb, she allows herself to be used as a bait so that Polonius and the King may overhear what Hamlet may have to say to her. It is their first meeting in a long time, with the exception of his anguished storming of her room. This is the crisis of their relationship, and it is Ophelia's complete want of courage which makes the encounter catastrophic to both of them. The poor creature, trapped by Polonius' tyranny, hopes some-

how that the gesture of forcing into Hamlet's hands his former gifts will cause him to understand what she knows not how to put into words without disobeying her father. She is the forlorn maiden waiting in her prison tower to be rescued by her fair knight, who does not even know she is there. Alas! such maidens, who cannot make clear their needs, are likely to wait forever for their rescuer.

Knowing her father is listening to all she says, what can she do in her impotence but weep bitterly, weep because her lover does not guess the heavy burden she bears, weep because she cannot tell him, weep because he does not contrive to rescue her from it? Most of Shakespeare's heroines would never have been so unreasonably obedient to their father as to find themselves in such an impasse. But all women expect the unintuitive male to understand without explanations—to know that a rejection is not necessarily a rejection, that a situation is nothing like what it appears to be. Having no clue to her two months' avoidance of him, despite his quick-wittedness, Hamlet can only conclude that she is playing a hypocritical game with him—at a court of hypocrites.

From this time on he naturally tries to kill his love for her, but he never succeeds in doing so. How deep his love remains, we witness at her funeral. It is truly ludicrous to have to consider the to-do raised by criticism over "the disgusting and insulting grossness of his language to her in the play scene." A few bawdy jests lightly tossed off (and mixed, it is true, with some withering sarcasms because of her having trapped him earlier that day, as he thinks)—partly the product of his excitement at the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago," partly an attempt to appear gay enough to disarm any possible suspicions of Claudius—why should they be construed so heavily? Ophelia accepts them in the merry vein in which they are intended—that much may be said for her—and seems even pleased at Hamlet's sallies as signifying his recovery of high spirits. Though assuredly a "nice girl," if ever there was one, she understands his bawdry very well, and gives no token of being really offended with it. She reproves him almost with an embarrassed titter which shows that she is quite pleased with him—in a way that women often do at such moments. Moreover, the standards for decency were quite different in the days before Puritanism so much altered the English character. Many of Shakespeare's most exquisite

heroines deliver themselves of ribaldries that would have made a Victorian damsel feel obliged to faint only to hear. Certainly no one would censure the morals of Portia or Beatrice because they own a robust sense of humor; and Desdemona listens to the "indecentencies" of Iago without making a scene, but rather encourages him to continue with his merriment. Ophelia, even though her speech (until she loses her mind) would satisfy the most rigid Victorian code, as an Elizabethan would have been accustomed to taking ribald merriment in her stride. That she was by no means unfamiliar with it is proved by the fact that in her madness she sings a song of such bawdiness as matches anything Hamlet says. Obviously she has not only heard the ditty, but memorized it as well. This is a stupid point to have to discuss, and one leaves it willingly.

Her misery over her situation, over her lover's madness (thus she accounts for his severity towards her), and then over her father's death and Hamlet's exile proves too much for her weak spirit to bear, and she loses what little mind she ever had. Without her father's commands she hardly knows how to live. It is in her madness that she at last touches us with deep pity. Shakespeare nowhere shows himself a sublimer artist than in the manner in which he gives us to understand during the ravings of her disordered mind how fearful was her life in her father's household—through the fragments of her vagrant thoughts we read the dreadful subjection of her days, all the dread things she has overheard, all the unspeakable things she knows but has had to suppress within herself lest they leap into the light, all the terrible cost of her filial obedience. Shakespeare's genius enabled him to reveal the mysterious workings of the unconscious mind in the "mad scenes," centuries before the Freudian theories, and not in the dangerous clinical manner of the psychoanalysts, but, like the true artist, as an imitation of life as it is lived.

It should be observed, by the way, that the madness of Ophelia might readily have settled the question of Hamlet's reputed madness or feigned madness. As Shakespeare shows us her loss of mind, we find it much resembling the madness of Lear and the pretended madness of Edgar—these three examples clearly exhibiting Shakespeare's method of representing insanity on the stage. All three appear more or less fantastically garbed, all three speak without order or logical sequence, all three are unaware (except for moments of

clarity) of the identity of the people they address. That fact alone should deal the death-blow to any wisp of a suspended judgment on the question as to whether or not Shakespeare intended the Prince to be understood either as mad or feigning madness. Hamlet's dress is the normal dress for mourning, his remarks are always to the point and flow in recognizable order, and he is always very much aware of to whom it is he speaks, much more aware than his interlocutor (or often the critic) remotely guesses!

POLONIUS

With the exception of the Prince himself, Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the persons of the drama most frequently misrepresented on the stage.

Actors interpret Polonius either as a charming old man, running over with sound opinion, and an affectionate, indulgent father; or as a pleasant but somewhat befuddled councilor, with the best of intentions in the world. Among the critics the most extreme tribute paid to him has been that of Tieck: "I see in Polonius a real statesman. Discreet, politic, keen-sighted, ready at the council-board, cunning upon occasions, he had been valued by the deceased King, and is now indispensable to his successor."⁴³ As regards the old man's intelligence, even Samuel Johnson's famous "dotage encroaching on wisdom," though nearer the truth, is a characterization far too generous. That Polonius did serve the late King is an indication that he may once have possessed some ability; but it must have been entirely in the realm of politics. He has the kind of mind, often to be met with in the business and professional worlds, that by its shrewd concentration upon material successes achieves its goal at the cost of everything else. He is devoid of warmth, humanity, and affection (except for his son), and gives symptoms of never having known a spiritual impulse in his life. A career of making all his acts subservient to self-advancement has in the end deadened even his practical cunning. At the age we meet him he is certainly indispensable to no one. Nothing is left of his ability and shrewdness but a few tags, a few catch-phrases, to which, even when they do express some grains of truth, he pays scant heed in his own demeanor. It is he, for example, who utters the celebrated:

brevity is the soul of wit

II, ii, 90

—a profound truth; but no character in Shakespeare is so long-winded as Polonius. He is always threatening to be brief, is always about to sum up in a few words—and continues to harangue his audience by the hour.

We never encounter him doing a wise or creditable thing, or giving anyone intelligent counsel. He is, in short, a dotard of the most limited horizons, a clumsy fool who stands in his own light. Understanding the world from his own unenlightening experiences, he is honest enough in refusing to believe that Hamlet could possibly wish to marry anyone so far below him in rank as Ophelia. Though Hamlet's intentions were entirely honorable, and even the Queen approved her son's choice, Polonius in Hamlet's place would never have made such a disadvantageous match.

He is very well pleased with his own feeble mind, however, and thinks he knows the answers to all questions. His inability to follow the speed of Hamlet's intellect is merely evidence to him (and many critics) that the Prince is "far gone." Besides being an ass, he is, of course, a time-server, always the friend to the party in power, with the keen scent of politicians for which way the wind is blowing.

It is probably an uncritical admiration for the well-known advice he gives Laertes before his son's departure for Paris which is responsible for Polonius' reputation for wisdom. That passage has been memorized by generations of unhappy school children, as though it were an ideal guide to the good life. Listened to carefully, however, though containing a few acceptable platitudes, it turns out to be admirable enough as precepts for getting on in the world; but the man who followed it would certainly be cheated of experience's richest rewards. Yet the phraseology of this speech has echoed down the centuries—for no good reason. What has been the point of mouthing

And it must follow as the night the day

I, iii, 79

as though it were the sublimest instead (as Shakespeare intended) of the emptiest of images, a perfect reflection of the obvious-minded-

ness of the dotard who speaks it? In the advice there are, as we have said, some truisms, but such platitudes

so extreme in date,
It were superfluous to state!

Keep the friends you have tried; do not be running after new ones; dress well but not gaudily—even a dunce knows that much. But the passage taken as a whole contains nothing admirable.

This above all: to thine own self be true

sounds noble enough—until you realize that in context it can only mean, “Be true to your own material advantage; see to it that you line your pockets well.” For Polonius advises: Do not go about letting people know what you really are thinking; let others confide in you and express their opinions as much as they wish—but keep your own counsel. Avoid getting into a quarrel, but once you are in it see that you win (no matter, apparently, whether you are in the right or the wrong). Remember that clothes make the man. Never lend money; that is the way to lose money and friend. Never borrow money; that discourages habits of thrift.

Such guidance will do for those who wish to make the world their prey, but it is dignified by no humanity. Who can live humanly without ever borrowing or lending? Is one to turn his back on his best friend in an hour of need? Will the sensible man grieve when he has lost what he took to be a friend because of a loan made him? Does he not rather congratulate himself at having made a good investment, no matter what the sum, at having paid little for so important a discovery? Polonius, naturally, can give to his son only the crass philosophy which molded his own career. (How different is the precept of the noble Countess of Rousillon, who is able to hold as a model to her son a father quite other than Polonius—who need only remind him what he owes to his line, when she would teach him how to live:

Be thou blest, Bertram! and succeed thy father
In manners as in shape! thy blood and virtue
Contend for empire in thee; and thy goodness
Share with thy birthright! *Love all, trust a few,*

*Do wrong to none: be able for thy enemy
Rather in power than use; and keep thy friend
Under thy own life's key.*

All's Well That Ends Well, I, i, 70 seq.

Like everyone else in the play, Polonius's character is to be gauged by the way he behaves. He bullies his daughter, crushing every spark of life out of her. He sends a spy after his son to discover just what the young man is up to in Paris (II, i). His emissary, in order to draw out the Danish colony in Paris, is himself to slander Laertes first. He is to describe him as "very wild," addicted to what Polonius thinks the "usual slips" of youth. Such as gambling? inquires Reynaldo. Yes, answers Polonius—gambling, or drinking, or swearing, or quarreling, or frequenting houses of prostitution. The servant, finer than the master, is astounded that he must so besmirch Laertes' character. But to Polonius these vices are to be expected of the "fiery mind"—he remembers his own youth! Reynaldo is not to go too far, however; he is not to represent Laertes as a *steady* patron of bawdyhouses. And why all this invention? Because, Polonius assures his man,

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth:

some Dane will be sure to come forward with the information that he has indeed seen Laertes gambling, or drunk, or quarreling, or entering "a house of sale—*videlicet*, a brothel." Having learned this, Reynaldo is to allow Laertes free rein. One cannot but conclude that Polonius is less worried that his son may be leading a vicious life than that it may not be vicious enough.

He is, in short, a notable upholder of a double standard for men and women. Ophelia is to make her prime concern retaining her virginity; Laertes may drink, swear, quarrel, and patronize the prostitutes—all in moderation. These vices would prove his son a youth of spirit. There is, unluckily, many a Polonius among fathers, suppressing his daughters' simplest human impulses, but eager to encourage his sons to be what he likes to think of himself as having been, a reckless young devil. Having learned nothing from life, having given nothing to it, their hope is to have their sons follow in their footsteps, to learn no more and give no more.

Polonius' most obvious trait is, of course, his tendency to become lost in words, the index of a befuddled brain which cannot follow through with an idea, which inevitably loses the thread in a labyrinth of verbiage. He might be considered, indeed, almost entirely a comic character were it not for the darker side of his nature which prevents our taking him too lightly. But his mental confusion, his being forever trapped by language, is certainly laugh-provoking. He is like an athlete practising on one of those treadmills which require one's running fast if one is to stay in the same place. So Polonius puffs away at words; the more of them he employs, the less he advances what he is trying to say. He could be said to sound like a walking thesaurus, if his words were not so dull, for he is unable to express the simplest notion without the aid of many synonyms. The more his phrases pile up, the less he contrives to say. Thus, while he is reporting his theory of the cause of Hamlet's "madness," he begins with the premise that the Prince is mad. Although Claudius and Gertrude are both prepared to grant him that, Polonius must embellish the idea—can no more put it aside than if it were glued to him:

I will be brief. Your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it; for, to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad? . . .
That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity,
And pity 'tis 'tis true. . . .
Mad let us grant him then; and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause. . . .

Words, words, and nothing! At last he comes to Ophelia, and again he begins by announcing a truth no one would dispute:

I have a daughter;
even this, however, he cannot allow to pass without some addition:
—have while she is mine.

II, ii, 92 seq.

The stupidity of this old fossil is excruciatingly funny. His dullness is in complete contrast to, and thus makes a perfect foil for, Ham-

Why should Claudius be so anxious to please him? Why should he choose to retain him as his counselor at all? The obvious answer (and in light of it, we may justly interpret Polonius' quoted remarks as a reminder to the King of his indebtedness to him) is that the old man's position under Hamlet's father must have borne considerable weight in winning the election of the crown for Claudius. So much we take for granted about this time-server.

But do not Polonius' words remind Claudius of a deeper indebtedness? Does not Claudius retain the old man's services because he has no other choice?

There is a certain amount of evidence in the play which would point to Polonius' being rather worse than an old bore and time-server, to his being more nefarious than his white hairs would suggest. Why should Claudius, for example, after the Mouse-trap has revealed to him that Hamlet knows of the late king's murder, run so great a risk as to commission Polonius' listening behind the arras in Gertrude's chamber, when the King must know that Hamlet will speak of that murder to his mother? Why should he *allow anyone* to hear that tale? Why should he put the possession of such knowledge—even if it were only to be taken as a rumor not to be credited—in the hands of Polonius—why, unless Polonius already knows all about the murder, unless nothing he could hear would be news to him? In short, was not Polonius an accomplice in the murder of Hamlet's father? Such a deed as Claudius committed is almost impossible to manage singlehanded. Who would have been in a better position to assist him, who readier (in exchange for future favors) to assist him, than Polonius? It is entirely within the possibilities of his character that the old councilor should have been a partner in arranging the slaying, and it would explain Claudius' endless and otherwise incredible patience with him. And it would explain too the King's willingness to have Polonius an audience to Hamlet's talk with Gertrude; Claudius is certainly not the man to jeopardize his security under the circumstances with any man, unless that man were already as much involved in the crime as himself. It would add weight to the argument to remember that it is Polonius, moreover, who puts an end to the acting of the Mouse-trap when the King rises too agitated to stop the performance by word of mouth himself.

- OPH. The King rises.
 HAM. What, frighted with false fire?
 QUEEN. How fares my lord?
 POL. Give o'er the play.

III, ii, 276 seq.

The accusation against Polonius as an accomplice in the murder has been maintained by a few critics,⁴⁴ and, we believe, with reason. As a matter of fact, as has already been remarked (see page 238), Ophelia's mad scene would seem to contain fairly conclusive proof of his cooperation in the killing of Hamlet's father.

It is nevertheless undeniable that Shakespeare has preferred to leave this point in the background of the play, so that we are never more than dimly aware of it as a possibility. He had two chief reasons for underplaying Polonius' guilt:

1. He did not want to burden the portrait of Polonius to the extent that he must cease to be a source of comedy in the play—as he must if we consciously think of him as co-conspirator in the murder.

2. Polonius' complicity is not important to the plot. It is rather part of the story's background, and therefore does not merit undue prominence. (Shakespeare is always remarkable in knowing when to avoid unnecessary explanations. He knew that in plays where every trifling detail is explained and given full attention, the background tends to disappear altogether, everything moves up to the foreground, and the picture loses dimension.)

Shakespeare plainly wished us to do no more than strongly suspect Polonius of nefariousness. Since he chose to imply rather than to represent his complicity, it devolves upon us to feel vaguely about the whole matter too, but to feel strongly that Polonius is a repulsive old man, whose death causes pity not for himself, but for the reckless Prince who must perforce pay a heavy price for it.*

* Counterbalancing the popular overkindly view of Polonius' character is a particularly mad one of the German critic Flathe, who finds: that the whole "Polonius family" is a collection of heartless, ruthless, ambitious creatures, more important to the play than Claudius; that they are all straining for royal power; that Ophelia has no love for Hamlet but falls in with her father's machinations because she wishes to be

LAERTES

Laertes is a chip off the old block. Did an early death not cut him off in time, what Polonius is he would become. The unattractiveness of his character does not strike us so forcibly, however, because he is a young man. He has some of the dash, hence some of the charm, of youth; he is young enough to be capable of passionate emotion; the genuineness of his love for his father and sister indicates potentialities superior to Polonius. That capacity for love prevents our detesting him.

But he is undoubtedly headed the same way as his father. His moral strictures to Ophelia are identical with those of Polonius, and proceed from the same narrow limitations of values. He, too, cannot believe in Hamlet's sincerity of love only because the latter is a prince; he, too, defines virtue for his sister in terms of her maidenhead; he, too, believes it best for her to distrust her emotions till the marriage-knot has been safely tied. And he, too, believes in one code of morals for his sister and another for himself. When Ophelia, heeding his warning, recommends his advice to himself to live chastely too, he brushes her off with:

O, fear me not.

I, iii, 51

While he has already displayed his father's penchant for sermonizing her, he is not at all disposed to be lectured to by her, however briefly.

But it is on his return to Denmark that his unpleasanter side is exposed to us. How differently from Hamlet he goes about avenging a father's murder! His recklessness, unsupported by either the intelligence or the noble-mindedness of a Hamlet, precipitates him into the vilest sort of behavior. It is clear that the chief ingredient in his furious need of revenge is his concern about the world's opinion of him if he does not at once kill—anybody—in retaliation:

Queen; that they all use Hamlet's madness for their own ends, and play upon it; that when Hamlet ceases to love Ophelia, Polonius' furious ambition blinds him to the fact to the length that he brings about his own death; that Ophelia loses her mind because her father's death puts an end to *her* hopes for the throne, etc., etc.⁴⁵

QUEEN.

Calmly, good Laertes.

LAER.

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me
bastard,

Cries cuckold to my father. . . .

IV, v, 116 seq.

This regard for the esteem of others causes him to feel the lack of ceremony attending his father's burial as almost as great a catastrophe as the old man's death itself:

his obscure burial—

No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,

No noble rite nor formal ostentation—

Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to
earth . . .

IV, v, 213 seq.

His grief is real enough; but he is making a fuss partly because he feels it expected of him. His attitude is in marked contrast to Hamlet's indifference to the opinion of others.

Rash without nobility or a desire for justice, he is no match for Claudius. Though storming the palace with a rabble, and ready to take the King's life in revenge, he is quickly wound around the monarch's little finger, and before he knows it is apologizing for his threats.

When Claudius presently identifies Hamlet as the slayer of Polonius, we see Laertes at his worst. He is unconcerned with the facts—Hamlet, after all, did not deliberately commit murder—and is anxious only to get even, no matter how dishonorably. He would be willing to cut the Prince's throat even in a church, is willing to jeopardize his own immortal soul, will stoop to the most nefarious means—as long as he succeeds in killing Hamlet. While Hamlet cannot think of using any method of vengeance inconsistent with his own dignity, Laertes, having no such commodity, is prepared to employ any means. The King's plan of arranging for an unbated sword in the fencing match is vile enough, but it is Laertes who at once offers to anoint his sword with a mortal poison, a scheme worthy of the lowest kind of villain. Laertes is, of course, not that; our disgust with his methods is somewhat tempered by the sincerity

of his anguish. Nevertheless, his proneness to base trickery reveals capacities for unlimited treachery.

His virility is only of the obvious kind, the kind his father has approved of, but it lacks any moral stature. When Hamlet publicly apologizes for his conduct at Ophelia's grave, Laertes, did he possess any quality, must feel ashamed of the part he has agreed to play, and is still in time to renounce it. Instead, he hypocritically pretends to accept Hamlet's friendly overtures at the very moment he knows his murderous purposes are in a matter of minutes to make an end of the other.

The best of him is his strong family feeling. But even here, though he wins our sympathy, we must feel the same distaste that is Hamlet's for his melodramatic display of emotion at his sister's grave. The emotion is sincere, but experience teaches us that those who can make a great show of feeling on such occasions are never those who feel most deeply. Unlike Hamlet, he weeps easily. He feels as deeply as he can, but the very excess of his exhibition points to a quick recovery.

What he is, Polonius in all likelihood once was. Thus are we forced to judge him.*

* E. K. Ilyin has made available the record of a conversation held in French between Gordon Craig and Stanislavski in 1909 on the stage of the Moscow Art Theatre, where the young Craig had been invited to stage *Hamlet*. The discussion, taken down in Russian by a co-producer of Stanislavski's, is quite amusing to read not only because Craig's discomfort is obvious (possibly it was owing to the annoyance of seeing his words being transcribed as they came out) but also because his opinions about Polonius and his two children are very lively. Almost the first thing he says is: "Laertes is basically nothing but a little Polonius" (almost our own very words for years before the article was printed). Stanislavski expresses surprise that there should be anything "different" about that family. Yes, Craig assures him, "a fatuous stupid family." Ophelia too? "I am afraid so. She must be both stupid and lovely at the same time. . . . Like the whole family . . . she is a terrible nonentity. . . . All the advice that Laertes and his father give Ophelia shows their extraordinary pettiness and insignificance." Stanislavski simply cannot conceive of such an Ophelia; how can she be such a fool as Craig describes her? "Perhaps she was frightened by a boy on a fence who made faces at her." ⁴⁶

HORATIO

It is Shakespeare's practice in many of his tragedies to include among the persons of the drama a man close to the central character, a man of less magnificence than the hero but also without his shortcomings, a man of less genius but greater balance of character, remarkable in the play's setting for his loyalty, soundness of judgment, and humanity—the individual in the drama who represents the norm of human conduct at its best, a man who is the salt of the earth. In *Romeo and Juliet* he is Benvolio, always bespeaking moderation and calm reflection; in *King Lear* he is Kent, rugged, frank, loving, speaking out when no one else dares speak the truth; in *Antony and Cleopatra* he is Enobarbus, rough soldier, mincing no words, stooping to no flattery when his commander is bent on self-destruction; in *Hamlet* he is Horatio. The dramatic employment of these characters is another demonstration of Shakespeare's cunning as an artist. For it is against the boundless good sense and loving concern of these men that we best gauge the excesses of the more gifted hero.

From the very beginning Horatio's is the voice of sane judgment in the tragedy. In the opening scene, we find Horatio politely skeptical about the existence of ghosts:

Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.

I, i, 30

Despite the desultoriness of Craig's remarks, his are the only opinions about the three we have ever been able to be in full accord with. It is too bad he has nothing to say about Hamlet or any of his problems—though he is unintentionally droll about the Prince's relations to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. "They were good friends at school," he says, and then adds inaccurately, "that is why he sent for them, to have the chance of renewing their friendship." Stanislavski is quick to remind him that it was Claudius who sent for them. "Yes," counters Craig, "but they were brought up together." "Lots of people are brought up together! There's a great difference between being brought up together and being friends." Cornered, Craig blunders badly: "Quite right. When they found out that Hamlet had not inherited the throne they went over to the King."

(Craig, by the way, finds Desdemona "rather stupid," but adores Cordelia and Imogen.)

But, though rational, he does not push his rationality, as so many do, to the point of fanaticism. There is no need for Hamlet to assert to him that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in philosophy, for Horatio is not so foolish as to deny the evidence of his senses even if he cannot account for what they perceive.* The Ghost appears, and its appearance puts an end to Horatio's skepticism:

Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.

I, i, 56-58

Reason dictates doubt about such matters; but good sense requires accepting the evidence, even when it defies logic.

Thus, throughout the play, Horatio's quiet voice continues to urge intelligence and moderation upon Hamlet and anyone else he speaks to. It is characteristic of him, when the Queen dreads having to see Ophelia in her madness, that he should remind her that there are more important considerations than her own thinness of skin:

'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.
Let her come in.†

IV, v, 14-16

He is a man of few words, and his friendship with Hamlet is so perfect that they need none. Whatever Hamlet has to impart, he understands at once. When Hamlet's affection one time starts to

* They tell a story, not really amusing, but illustrative of the man of remorselessly logical mind—than whom no one is ever, probably, more unbalanced. Such a one—he was a German, of course—met an American traveler at Cairo, and said, "Young man, I suppose you came the canal through?" "No," said the American. "Then you came the river down?" "No," said the American. "Then you came the desert across?" "No," said the American. "In that case, my friend," said the German haughtily, "you haff not yet arrived."

† The 1604 edition of the play assigns these lines to Horatio, the 1623 edition (plainly in error) to the Queen. The advice has the very sound of Horatio's good judgment.

pour out in words, Horatio, who needs no reassurance, tries to intercept the flow:

HAM. Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation coped withal.
HOR. O, my dear lord,—

III, ii, 59-61

He never fears to disagree with his friend. He indicates his feeling that Hamlet has been unjust to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (V, i, 56); when the Prince quarrels with Laertes at Ophelia's grave, it is Horatio who murmurs:

Good my lord, be quiet.
V, i, 288

And when Hamlet, revolted at the insensitiveness of the gravedigger who can sing an idiotic song quite cheerfully while shoveling up a skull that once tenanted a human brain, asks:

Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?

Horatio in a terse line reminds him that since the world cannot dispense with gravemakers, we must expect them in self-defense to harden themselves if they are to endure their necessary work:

Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

Hamlet is quick to catch the gentle reproof implied by his friend, and handsomely acknowledges the thoughtlessness of his over-exquisite revulsion:

'Tis e'en so. The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.

V, i, 73 seq.

Again, in the same scene, when the sight of Yorick's skull generates a train of gloomy thoughts in the Prince:

To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?

Horatio gently warns his friend that there is neither intellectual nor spiritual profit in indulging the mind in morbid speculations of that kind:

'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.

V, i, 223 seq.

It is part of wisdom to recognize as insoluble the mysteries of life and death, and not to dissipate the health of the mind in attempting to answer the unanswerable. There are enough questions which we can answer.

At the end of the tragedy, the survival of this perfectly balanced, admirable man among the living forms a significant part of the *katharsis*. After Hamlet's death, with a man of Horatio's stamp still in the world, we feel some justification in the race's continuing its hard struggle against evil.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

While Hamlet's two old schoolfellows have not the beauty, modesty, humanity, or sensitiveness of Horatio's intelligence, there is no warrant in the play for their being represented, as they constantly are on the stage, as a pair of reptiles.

They were never as close to the Prince as Horatio, but the evidence is that among his friends they have shared the next place in his affections. It is unthinkable that a man as quick and intuitive as Hamlet, who misses no look of the eye or intonation of the voice, would have made friends of two "smirking and bowing, . . . assenting, wheedling, flattering" knaves such as Goethe describes them as being,⁴⁷ and the world conceives them to be. Such could not have come within a mile of intimacy with Hamlet.

They seem to be the not very profound but agreeable, jolly good fellows we all number among our acquaintances. The three of them must have had many good times together, and it is on the basis of their capacity for drawing him "on to pleasures" that the King has pretended to send for them. We all retain people dear to us because they have been "of so young days brought up" with us, and this was their sort of friendship with Hamlet. He could not be more delighted than he is to see them, when they first arrive (II, ii, 228

seq.). If they were treacherous by nature, Hamlet would have been the first to know it, and the last to greet them with such obvious pleasure. It is in the very nature of their relationship that they should be the bearers of the news of the theatrical world and also herald the arrival of the actors in town.

But Hamlet assuredly turns against them, remorselessly and finally. Before their first interview in the play is ended he, who has welcomed them as best of friends, parts from them as among the most contemptible of his foes. Nothing in the play is more subtly demonstrated than this alteration in his feelings. (See page 201.) When Hamlet feels he must distrust them, it is the last in the series of his disenchantments with those he has loved. But that he feels this does not mean that he feels it justly.

As a matter of fact, poor Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are the unlucky victims of circumstance in the play. It is their misfortune to become enmeshed quite innocently in the struggle between Hamlet and the King. Their original intent was honorable. They have been asked, as good friends, to do what they can to divert Hamlet and try to discover what it is that afflicts him, and to find out whether there be anything that Claudius as a loving father can do that lies within his remedy (II, ii, 18). The Queen has seconded this plea of the King, adding that Hamlet has much talked of them,

And sure I am two men there are not living
To whom he more adheres.

The King, of course, means to use them because his own uneasy mind wishes to discover what can be the cause of Hamlet's discontented conduct. But they honestly believe that Claudius is anxious to help their friend—why should they not? When the King and Queen both inform them that Hamlet is "transformed," there is no reason why they should not credit what has been told them or entertain any suspicion of Claudius's motives. Had they been bosom-friends to Hamlet, like Horatio, the case might have been different.

When they meet their friend, they therefore look for signs of his mental aberration, and soon enough find them—since they know nothing of Hamlet's problem or misery. All they can see is that Hamlet's mother and stepfather are so concerned over his well-being that they themselves have been expressly sent for. Yet he speaks of

Denmark as a prison—he, the heir-apparent! Their poor friend is in a bad way.

They have, in short, with the best of intentions, undertaken a mission better declined. No one can play the spy on a friend—for no matter what high-minded ends—with honor. It is an office they should have refused.

They have, unluckily for them, simple, unsubtle minds. They cannot comprehend Hamlet's sudden detestation of them—unless it be on the grounds of madness. It is with the sorrow of despised friendship that Rosencrantz overcomes his pride to ask sincerely:

Good, my lord, what is the cause of your distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend.

The lines cry out the man's sincerity. Hamlet's curt answer evokes another response from his old friend which bespeaks his mystification:

HAM. Sir, I lack advancement.

ROS. How can that be, when you have the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark?

III, ii, 350 seq.

Loathing them, Hamlet refuses to be forthright with them again, nor will he afford them an opportunity to prove the honesty of their friendship.

In the end they are put to death without justice. They have no knowledge that the sealed documents they bear to the English King command Hamlet's death. In their eyes the flight to England is a measure for Hamlet's protection after his murder of Polonius. Claudius can have appeared to them only in the light of a patient father whose love for Hamlet, like theirs, has been rejected because of their friend's warped mind. But for Hamlet, rash man, capable of being as monstrously unjust as he is nobly desirous of being honorable, it is enough that they bear the commission for his execution. And so without a tremor he sends them to their death.

It indeed proves catastrophic for these two that they should, though innocent, come

Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

V, ii, 61-2

Men of their rather commonplace, if agreeable, stamp are ever in danger of disaster when they make friends with a man of Hamlet's volcanic character. The atmosphere hovering about genius is always charged with lightning.

Luckless pair! Victims of the machinations of Claudius and the rashness of Hamlet, they have since been doomed to be even more the victims of the misunderstanding of critics, directors, and actors!

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